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BLUE STEELE BOX SET 2

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BLUE STEELE – THAT WHICH DOESN'T KILL ME - Book 4 of the Blue Steele Series

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TEXAS STATE FAIR, DALLAS TEXAS 1993

WHEN I WAS NINE, I remember staring with an open mouth as I gazed up at Big Tex, the symbol of the Texas State Fair.

The statue was over five stories high and looked amazing, and then it talked. Big Tex wore a 75-gallon cowboy hat and size 70 boots. I looked over at my sister Jenny and saw that she was frightened by it, but also fascinated.

"He ain't real, Jenny."

"I know, but something that big is scary."

Big Tex was gigantic, but nearly twenty years later, the fifty-two-foot high statue would be consumed within minutes due to a fire started by a tiny electrical short.

We could have stared up at Big Tex all day, but after a while, our mama and daddy hurried us along, and we headed for the rides.

We spent hours roaming the fairgrounds and having fun, but the fun was interrupted as Jenny and I stood in line to buy cotton candy.

When we were nearly to the counter, a boy of about twelve pushed in front of us. I remember looking over at my daddy, who was sitting with Mama on a nearby bench. I wondered if he was going to teach the boy a lesson in manners, but no, he just sat there and stared back at me.

I reached up and tapped the boy on the shoulder.

"Hey, no cutting in line."

The boy glanced back over his shoulder and gave me a dismissive look.

"What are you gonna do about it?"

I didn't know what to do, and so I just stood there.

"That boy asked you a question, Blue."

I looked at my father again.

"Daddy?"

"He asked you what you were gonna do about someone treating you with disrespect."

"But Daddy… he… he's bigger than me."

"So, anyone bigger than you can just treat you anyway they want, girl? Is that what you're telling me?"

I thought about that, thought about it and grew angry.

“No, sir!”

“Then answer the boy’s question.”

And I did, I took Jenny’s hand and the two of us stepped in front of him, reclaiming our place in line. The boy stared down at me with angry eyes as I glared back up at him defiantly. I was ready to fight if I had to, but he was shoved aside by the teenage boy in line behind us.

“Beat it, kid, and stop being a jerk.”

The boy stared up at the teenager, who was muscular. He swallowed hard once and then slinked away.

The teenager spoke to me.

“Hey, little girl.”

I turned around and looked up at him.

“Yeah?”

He laughed. “You got guts.”

“Thanks.”

When I looked back at my daddy, he was smiling.

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RAMÓN and I were staying at my family's farm when we got the awful, and yet, long-awaited news.

My sister Jenny and her husband Chad were also there along with my mama. Jenny and Chad had recently returned from their honeymoon. The two of them were as happy as I've ever seen a couple. Jenny was well along in her pregnancy and we were all looking forward to the baby's birth.

I was standing at the sink washing the lunch dishes when Jenny told me the baby's sex.

"A boy? That's fantastic, and have you thought of a name yet?"

"No Blue, but we've got time."

I smiled over at Chad. He was a good-looking man with blond hair and an easygoing manner.

"Maybe Chad Jr.?"

"No, I've never liked it for myself, so I won't be passing it on."

Ramón was seated at the table beside Mama. He held up his computer tablet as he spoke to Chad.

"I've been reading your book and it's excellent, I've only a few chapters left and I still don't know who the killer is."

Chad grinned. "Well then, I've done my job." Chad was a mystery writer, and was actually a cousin of famed writer, Lindsay Reynolds. With three novels of his own in print, it looked as though he was going to follow in her footsteps. His next book was going to be a collaboration with his vastly more well-known relation.

Mama smiled at Chad. "So how do you like farm life so far?"

"It's great, but then, I don't do much of the actual work around here."

"Oh hell, that's why I rent out the land, so someone else can do the work. This is just an itty-bitty place anyway, at least by Texas standards, but it pays for itself."

"My offer still stands," Chad said.

Mama scoffed at that with a wave of her hand.

Chad and Jenny were living with her and wanted to pay rent, but my mama wouldn't hear of it. In the end, it was agreed that Chad and Jenny would pay for the groceries. I was just glad that they were living there; otherwise, my mama would have been left all alone.

~

AFTER LUNCH, Ramón and I went for a ride on a pair of horses that belonged to Chad and Jenny.

Ramón had never been on a horse until three days earlier. He was a fast learner and looked at ease in the saddle.

"How are you doing over there?"

Ramón smiled at me.

"I see why you love this so much. I should get my own when I return home; after all, I have enough land for one."

"You might want to give that more thought, owning a horse is a huge expense. You would have to build a stable, fence in the land, and the food and veterinary costs aren't cheap."

"Still, I'd be willing to do it, but only if I had a partner to ride with."

I smiled. "You would buy me a horse?"

"I would buy you the world, Blue."

"The offer is sweet, but no, a horse would be too much."

"The offer stands, and so does my other offer."

I grew quiet then.

Ramón had asked me to move in with him recently and I turned him down. I loved him, but we had only been together for a few months. We were still so new together that I was unwilling to make that leap. I had never lived with a man before, and with the crazy hours I sometimes had to keep, I thought that it would put a strain on us. He, on the other hand, thought that I was pulling away from him. Maybe I was just a bit, but it was only because I feared ruining a good thing.

"I thought you were going to let that go?"

"You're right," he said, then pointed back toward the house. "It looks like there's company arriving."

I squinted at the pickup truck coming up the driveway. When I recognized it, I grinned.

"That's Deke Thomas, he was one of my daddy's best friends. He's also a Texas Ranger."

"Oh right, I met him at your sister's wedding."

We quickened our pace and I was glad to see that Ramón was able to handle the horse easily; he really was a fast learner.

I gave Deke a hug and then realized that he had a strained look on his face.

"Deke, is something wrong?"

My mama knew, she knew the moment she laid eyes on him, and as she asked the question, those eyes were crying.

"They finally found him, didn't they?"

Deke nodded solemnly.

“Yes, Maggie, the mystery of Blue’s disappearance has finally been solved, and damn if he wasn’t right about his ‘*Herd Thinner*.’”

My daddy, a Texas Ranger, was convinced that one man had been killing across the country for over five decades without being detected. The means the man used to kill, as well as the victims he chose were so varied that the experts attributed the murders to multiple persons.

By chance, Daddy had detected a recurring pattern to the dates of several murders, and soon realized that the pattern went back decades. Despite numerous attempts to have federal authorities investigate his theory further, no one ever gave it any credence. Daddy worked the case alone on his own time.

Until today, no one had known what became of my father, and his theory of a “*Herd Thinner*” had continued to be dismissed by experts in the FBI.

I stared into Deke’s eyes.

“The man who killed my daddy, where is he?”

“He’s dead, Blue, this all came to light because someone stumbled upon his body. The man was very old and died of natural causes.”

“Where’s my daddy’s body?”

“Here in Texas, near the Oklahoma border, a town called Botcher is where they… found him. There were over a hundred souvenirs found on the scene as well, many of which have already been identified as belonging to victims. Some of them date back to the 1950’s.”

Souvenirs, or sometimes trophies, are the names given by law-enforcement to any object taken off a victim by a serial killer. The fact that there were over a hundred of them made my head spin.

Deke reached into a pocket and brought out a small blue velvet case that looked like it came from a jeweler. Mama realized what was in it, because her knees grew weak. If Ramón hadn’t steadied her, she might have collapsed to the ground.

“Let me see it,” she said, and Deke opened the case to reveal my daddy’s badge. The shiny silver metal was shaped like a circle with a five-pointed star in its middle.

Deke handed it to her and she kissed it.

“I always knew that death was the only thing that could have kept him from us. I thank God that I didn’t have to go to my grave without knowing what happened to him.”

Chad and Jenny led Mama inside and I gave Deke a hug.

“Thank you for coming here personally.”

“I had to Blue, but be prepared, this story is about to go national.”

“Will my father’s name be mentioned?”

Deke smiled. “You bet your ass it will. The FBI is going to be eating crow over this one for years to come. If they had given more weight to your daddy’s theory, then some of those victims would be alive today.”

“And so would my daddy,” I said, as I fell into Ramón’s arms amid tears.

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DEKE SAT at the kitchen table and drank a glass of whisky as Ramón and I joined him.

"They've been trying to keep this story low-profile, but any fool would know that's not possible. The earliest victim is from 1950 and was a high school girl named Cindy James. Her locket appears to be the oldest of the souvenirs. It was positively identified by her younger sister. The murder took place so long ago that the sister is now living in a nursing home."

"When were these souvenirs found?"

"Nearly a week ago, but the bodies were discovered later, because at first they thought the souvenirs were just a box of junk. That evidence was nearly tossed away, but a female deputy wondered why an old man would keep such things as that locket. When she dug into it, she found that several items belonged to murder victims."

"How did you get my daddy's badge? I know that it must be evidence too."

"Hell, that thing has been printed, photographed, examined, and even x-rayed. The crime scene dudes have plenty of other things they can study, but I knew that badge would be important to your mama, and so I pulled some strings."

"Who killed Daddy, Deke?"

"The house on the property was actually a double-wide trailer that was owned by a man named Clayton Harker. Harker's own corpse was discovered by a county social worker after the man had been dead for weeks. It's believed that Clayton Harker murdered your daddy."

"Believed?"

"Well, nothing is for certain yet. The locals say that Harker didn't always live there alone the last dozen years or so. There's a nephew of his named Darrell Harker that's wanted for questioning. At the time your father went missing, Darrell was just a boy of fourteen."

"How did Daddy die?"

"We're still waiting on the full autopsy report, but… they say there was a bullet hole in the back of his skull."

"Shot from behind then, not surprising, as quick as my daddy was with a gun, no one would have been faster face to face."

Deke looked over at the stairs.

“Is your mama gonna be all right?”

“Yeah, even after so many years, it’s, it’s just still a shock, but in another way, it’s a relief to finally know what happened to him.”

Deke squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them again, I saw that they were moist.

“I miss your daddy something awful, Blue.”

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“We all do, Deke.”

~

DEKE WAS RIGHT about the story exploding. The following days saw the *Herd Thinner* case become a headline story. My father was hailed as a hero while the FBI was excoriated for not heeding his warnings and offering assistance.

The *Herd Thinner* had begun as a theory for my father and later became an obsession, an obsession that led to his death.

The souvenirs found in Clayton Harker’s trailer told quite a story once they had been photographed and categorized. The computer database immediately came up with thirty-two likely matches concerning murders that took place over decades and all across the country.

Clayton Harker had spent over fifty years as a long-haul trucker, a profession my father had theorized as most likely for his *Herd Thinner*. Harker had left a slew of victims along his path and I found myself wondering who the others were who had been found on his property.

Perhaps the other bodies were of people who had stumbled onto what he really was and so were killed for their knowledge, as my daddy was.

And what of the nephew, who was actually a grandnephew? Was Darrell Harker unaware of what his granduncle was, or had he become an accomplice? Could it have been him and not the elderly Harker that murdered my father?

News reports stated that he too was a trucker and that his rig had been found abandoned near a bus depot in Nebraska. If he was on the run, then that seemed to indicate guilt of one kind or another.

The questions and revelations coming from the news reports filled my thoughts. I simply wanted to know the truth about how my father died and by whose hand. Until I knew the answers to those questions, I would never have peace. Although I found it difficult to accept that a fourteen-year-old boy could have ended my father’s life.

~

RAMÓN and I drove back two days later. I stayed over at his place because of how late we had arrived home. When I checked my phone that morning, I found I had received more messages, both voice and text, from friends offering their condolences.

Ramón handed me a cup of coffee.

"How are you, Blue?"

"I'm okay, but I didn't sleep well, too many bad dreams."

"I know, you tossed and turned all night."

"I'm sorry, did I keep you awake?"

"Not really, it's just that I'm a light sleeper."

"I'm going back to my place today, and later on I'm going to check in with Ron and pick up some paper. I need to work, to take my mind off things."

Ramón held up his phone.

"I may be working soon too. One of my contacts called and she has a likely candidate, but I won't know if it's a go until later today."

"Who's the candidate?"

"I don't know, but she said he would be coming from the Ukraine."

"Why is there a delay?"

"They're being vetted; I don't let just anyone into Santuario."

"Let me know if you go, but I'll probably be out looking for a skip."

"I could be gone for days if the call comes in."

I put my cup down and sat on his lap. The nightgowns I had taken to my mama's were still dirty and packed away, and so I was wearing one of Ramón's T-shirts; it slid far up my thighs as I sat.

"Have you showered yet?" I asked.

"I did, but I volunteer to scrub your back for you."

I smiled. "My front may need some attention as well."

Ramón stood while still holding me, and up the stairs we went.

~

I ARRIVED home and found that a note had been slipped under my door from the landlord. After opening it, I read the bad news.

My lease was being terminated in 90-days. The building would be demolished to make room for a "More Modern" apartment complex. Prices of the new units were more than double what I was paying, but I and the other tenants were being given the first opportunity to lease them.

The letter asked that I reply as soon as possible to let the management know of my decision.

I balled the paper up, tossed it in the trashcan, and began unpacking.

~

RAMÓN DID HAVE to work the next day and told me that he wouldn't be back for nearly a week. I used that time to try to return to the groove of daily living.

During the months in between our time in Europe and the trip to my mama's, I had begun working less and less. When I did work, I found my mind drifting back to my European adventure.

Tracking down and killing Natalie Stone had been more self-defense than revenge, and while it was happening I felt out of my depth. Still, she had been a world-class terrorist with a network behind her. To go from that and back to chasing thousand-dollar bail skips was a bit of a letdown.

I normally hunted the higher bounty criminals, but of late, they were rare, and so I found myself running down bail jumpers that were as challenging to find as a bear in the woods.

I was bored while working, something that I hadn't experienced in years. I began to wonder if a career change might not be in order. There was just one problem. Bounty hunting paid well, and I was very skilled at it. I also had set a goal for myself to accumulate enough to retire early and buy my own ranch.

If I took the time to change careers, I would likely eat through some of my savings in the process and set myself back. Still, boredom was unnatural to me, and in my current profession, dangerous as well. I sighed and assured myself that the malaise I was feeling would pass, and then I went in search of my next skip.

~

I DROVE an hour west of Fort Worth to a small farm where I thought I might find my skip.

The skip's name was Waylon Hanna; he was worth two-thousand dollars. Waylon had missed his court date for sentencing on an embezzlement charge. Coincidentally, it was two-thousand dollars that he was accused of stealing from an employer.

I spotted Waylon as he was feeding the chickens. When he saw me walking toward him, he sent me a smile. He was about my height, but chubby, with a fat face. He was wearing a pair of faded blue overalls with muddy work boots.

"Hey there, what's your name, cutie?"

"Waylon Hanna, my name is Blue Steele and I've come to take you back to Fort Worth."

He started to smile wider, as if he thought I was joking, but when I took out the handcuffs, the smile disappeared.

Waylon dropped the feed bucket and started running. I gave chase amid squawking hens and roosters. I was almost close enough to grab him when he jumped a fence and landed into a pigpen.

Now, I am hardly what you would call a girly-girl, but romping around in mud and pig excrement is not my idea of fun.

As I stood by the fence hesitating, Waylon looked back at me and grinned.

That did it. I wasn't about to let a skip laugh at me.

I grabbed a fence post with both hands and vaulted over it to land with a squish into the mud. It had rained hard in the area the night before and the mud inside the pen was deep. As usual, I was wearing boots, but the bottoms of my jeans were turning brown from the splatter. I was almost to the other side, when a piglet ran in front of me. I halted in mid-stride so as not to step on the tiny creature, as I did so, I lost my balance and fell face first into the mud.

I laid there for a moment just reeling from the disgust, when the piglet came over and began licking my face.

"Look what you made me do," I said, but he ignored me and kept licking.

I got up, angrier than ever at Waylon and began running again. I was so coated in mud and gunk that it fell off me in chunks as I ran.

Waylon had quite a lead, but as he ambled through the stable, I could see that the running had taken its toll on him. He was breathing through his open mouth. I ran harder to catch up and came even with him when he was just feet away from a pickup truck with a stack of red and blue poultry crates in its rear.

He spun around to punch me and I kicked him in the groin. That took any remaining fight out of him.

I placed the cuffs on Waylon as a man and woman drove in and parked near my truck. The man removed a shotgun from the rack in his vehicle and started toward me, as the woman scurried inside the house.

"What are you doing to my cousin?"

The man was holding the shotgun pointed at the ground.

"I'm taking him into custody and bringing him back to Fort Worth."

He started to say, "Oh no you ain't," as he raised the weapon, but only got as far as the, "Oh no you a—" when I aimed my gun at his face.

"Mister," I said. "I will shoot you dead if you raise that shotgun another inch."

He stared at me with venom in his eyes, but he lowered the gun.

"Good boy, now, I'm taking Waylon here with me and you will watch us leave. Make any attempt to stop us and I will shoot Waylon

and then so help me I will kill you."

"You're that Blue Steele, ain't you?"

I was surprised by the question, but nodded yes, as I did, he sat the shotgun on the ground beside him.

"You shot my buddy Mickey in the knee a while back, Mickey Kyle. Hell, that dude still ain't walkin' right."

I remembered Mickey; he had called me a "Chippie," or some such name.

I nodded again, then herded Waylon toward my truck. Waylon made a plea for help, and his cousin laughed.

"I like my knees just the way they are, Waylon."

I watched the man in my rear-view mirror as I drove away. He never made a move for the gun.

Waylon made a sniffling sound.

"You stink, lady."

I ran my hand through my hair, gathered up a fistful of mud, and jammed it into his face.

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I STOPPED at one of those do-it-yourself car washes along the way and gave both my pickup and myself a quick cleaning. My clothes were still wet when I handed Waylon over to the cops, but I was relatively mud-free.

When I arrived home, I went straight into the shower. After nearly an hour of scrubbing away grime I was myself again, at least outwardly, inside, I was now beyond bored and sick of what I was doing.

A year ago, I would have called my friend Becca and laughed as I told her about what had happened, but now, now, it just saddened me.

My father went after a brutal serial killer and lost his life in the process. Today, a man with a shotgun threatened me because I was taking his penny-ante crook of a cousin back to jail for minor thievery.

The terrorist that Ramón and I took down, Natalie Stone, she had a price on her head of fifty-thousand Euros. It was money we couldn't collect because of the way we ended her, but we did it, we played in the big leagues and won.

Then, today, I was back to chasing skips through mud.

The phone rang. It was Ramón.

"Are you home?" I asked.

"I am, and I'm hoping you will join me here."

I sighed. "I'm tired and I don't think that I would be very good company, but tell me, did everything go all right?"

"It went fine, and Santuario has three new residents, a small family."

"Ukrainians?"

"Yes, but different ones, my original client didn't pass the vetting process."

"Which means what?"

"He lied about who he was."

"And the people you brought back, who vetted them?"

"I did. The father saved my life and risked his own to do it."

I had been lying back on the sofa, but at those words, I sat up straight.

"You didn't tell me it would be dangerous."

"It shouldn't have been, but as I said, the first man lied."
"I'm coming over."
"I thought you were tired?"
"I want to see with my own eyes that you're all right."
"I'm fine, Blue, really, not a scratch."
"You don't want me to come over?"
"I want you to never leave."
I smiled. "I'll be right there."
"Come in the back way, I'll be grilling steaks."
"Hey."
"Yeah?"
"I love you."
"I love you too, Blue, now hurry."

I ended the call as I shook my head. Ramón and I had started as friends, became lovers, and now, now I loved him so much that it scared me a little. It was one of the reasons that I didn't want to move in with him. Breaking up with someone was hard enough, breaking up and losing someone you thought was a keeper was devastating.

It wasn't that long ago that I thought my ex-boyfriend Gary and I would be forever. As we were headed in that direction, it all fell apart, just like every relationship I've ever had.

In a way, even my daddy had left me, and the events of this week brought back all of those horrible feelings and memories of the days and weeks after his disappearance.

I felt depression threatening to swallow me. Before it could get a grip, I grabbed my purse and headed out the door.

~

THE STEAKS WERE delicious and there was a salad to go with them. I also stopped at a bakery on the way to Ramón's and bought a decadent chocolate cake for dessert.

Some people drink or take narcotics, but my drug of choice is usually chocolate.

We were seated out on the patio, and in the west, the sun was just going down.

"Tell me about your day," Ramón said.

I told him about my adventure in the pigpen.

"The thing licked you like a puppy?"

"It was the size of a puppy, and just as cute."

"Talk about pearls before swine, you work too hard."

"Did you see Walter while you were in Santuario?"

"Of course, and he asked about you."

"I should have gone with you."

“You’re welcome anytime; all I have is yours.”

I stared over at him.

“I thought you weren’t going to ask me to move in again.”

Ramón made a face. “Was I that obvious?”

“Yes, but I don’t mind, and the idea does appeal to me, it’s just…”

“Just what?”

“We really haven’t known each other that long, at least not as a couple.”

Ramón sent me a small shrug.

“I know what I feel for you and I’ve never felt it for anyone else. I want you around me every moment of the day; I make no apologies for that.”

“I’m flattered, really, and I feel the same way, but I’m not ready to risk myself again, at least not yet.”

“You’re talking about Gary?”

“Yes, I mean, one minute we were engaged, and the next—”

“—you were with me.”

I leaned across the table. “Hey, you’re not some rebound love affair if that’s what you’re afraid of; I truly love you, so much that it scares me a little.”

Ramón sighed. “You’re not the only one afraid, Blue, you own my heart, you know?”

“I promise not to break it.”

“This conversation is getting too intense, and I asked you here to relax.”

I smiled at him. “I can stay the night.”

“Excellent.”

~

WE CARRIED THE DISHES INSIDE, then snuggled on the sofa for a movie. As the TV came on, I saw a message crawl across the bottom of the screen. It stated there was a new development in what the pundits were calling “*The Herd Thinner*” case, just as my daddy had.

We waited with the sound muted until the inane sitcom went off, and then watched the news break at the top of the hour.

“Sources inside the investigation are claiming that Darrell Harker, grandnephew of Herd Thinner, Clayton Harker, is now wanted for murder. One of the three bodies recovered from the Harker property, that of seventeen-year-old, Melissa King, was found to have Darrell Harker’s DNA under her fingernails. In addition to that, his DNA has been linked to eight additional murders, murders that were committed in five different states. Sources say that Darrell Harker has now been dubbed “Protégée.” We’ll

have much more on this developing story at eleven."

THE NEWS ENDED and I gazed over at Ramón with a shocked look on my face.

"Is it possible that Darrell Harker murdered my daddy?"

"It sounds like it."

"He was just a boy back then."

"Take it from someone who grew up in a gang, teenage boys make excellent killers."

"I need to know what's really going on inside that investigation."

I grabbed my phone and searched my address book.

"Who are you calling?"

"Someone who might have the answers I need."

"You're talking about Lawson, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"He'll want something in return, those government types always do."

I stared at Ramón. "I know that."

Before I could dial, my phone rang. The caller ID was blank.

"Speak of the devil."

"Lawson?"

"He's the only one I know who makes the caller ID come up blank."

Ramón laid his right hand atop of mine.

"Whatever you decide to do, please think it over first."

I nodded in agreement and answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"This is Thomas Lawson, Miss Steele. I think we can help each other."

"What do you know that I don't?"

"Not on the phone, at least, not that phone, it's not secure."

"Can you come here?"

"No, but you'll receive a package containing a secure phone, you are still living in Mr. Acero's home, yes?"

"I don't live… Ramón and I… I'll be here. When is the phone being delivered?"

"At any moment, and you only need to turn it on to reach me."

"How James Bond of you,"

"Call me, Miss Steele, I have information you'll want."

"Lawson."

"Yes?"

"What will this cost me?"

"Get the phone, and then we'll talk, until then."

The conversation ended and the doorbell rang.

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THE PHONE ARRIVED in a package with an accompanying envelope that read, OPEN AFTER CALLING.

I powered on the newly delivered cell phone and it automatically dialed a number. There were no digits showing upon the screen, only the sound of varying tones indicated that it was in the process of making a connection.

Ramón was still in the living room, but I had moved to the kitchen to make the call. I told him that I would fill him in afterward. I wanted no distractions as I talked to Lawson. Ramón agreed, and was waiting for me to return.

Lawson answered and I could hear that he sounded more relaxed.

"Now we can talk, and first, how are you?"

"I'm curious…and wary."

"Wary? Of me?"

"Of what you represent,"

"I think you would agree that I'm not your average government bureaucrat, yes?"

"Yes."

"And I did help you in Europe, no?"

I relaxed. "How are you doing, Lawson?"

"I am as usual quite busy, but in good health. Thank you for asking."

"What do you know about Darrell Harker, about *Protégée*?"

"I suspect that it was he who murdered your father, and not his granduncle."

"Why do you say that?"

"The full autopsy report came in on Clayton Harker; the man had arthritis in both hands and had been so afflicted for many years. There's no way to be certain of course, but the coroner's best guess is that Clayton Harker had been incapable of holding, much less firing a gun at the time of your father's murder."

"You're saying that my father was murdered by a fourteen-year-old boy?"

"It would explain why he was shot from behind; he probably assumed the boy was no threat to him."

I thought about my daddy, and in my mind's eye I saw him

standing inside Harker's trailer. He had finally come face-to-face with the killer he had sought for so many years, only to be gunned down from behind by a boy he likely thought was merely a potential victim.

"Miss Steele… Blue?"

"I'm here Lawson, what's in the package?"

"Everything there is to know about Darrell Harker, including a psychological profile put together by the FBI."

"And what is your price for helping me?"

"I would like you to consider joining my team."

"I wouldn't do well in law enforcement. I don't have the temperament for that kind of structured routine. It's the reason I didn't become a Texas Ranger like my father."

"You've met Jace; does he strike you as a typical member of law-enforcement?"

"Hardly, in fact, when I first saw him, I thought you had brought your son along."

"Jace is on my team because he has talent. I look for talent, Miss Steele, talent going to waste such as your own. You're ready for the big leagues; you proved that in Europe."

"I'm not an assassin, Lawson. Natalie Stone was an exception."

"Yes, but she's not the first person you've killed. Also, I'm not looking for an assassin, I'm looking for a hunter of men; that is something that you excel at."

"Exactly what are we talking about here?"

"You would be a Federal Bounty Hunter."

"There's no such thing, and certain states have even banned bounty hunting."

"True, but in essence that's what you would be while working for me. Technically, you would be an agent of Homeland Security, but there would be no time clocks and routine. My guess is that you'll work less than you do now, but travel farther afield, and the men and women you'll be looking for will be more difficult to find."

"As an agent of Homeland Security?"

"Technically, and there would be a training period involved. You would have to learn their protocols and procedures, but you won't be filing paperwork. My people don't file paperwork, they simply get the job done and disappear."

"Is this what our mutual friend does?"

"Dr. White's husband? Yes, and no."

"Is there a chance that he and I would work together?"

"Possibly, but I would think rarely, why, would his assured participation sweeten the pot for you?"

"He's a married man, Lawson, and I'm with Ramón."

"Of course, I meant no offense or insinuation."

“When do you need an answer?”

“When you’re ready, this is an open-ended invitation.”

“Not to be gauche, but what would this pay?”

He named a figure, and stated that it was a salaried position, with full benefits.

The number he named was less than my best year but more than my average, much more when you factored in the benefits.

“I’ll get back to you soon one way or the other, but what about *Protégée*?”

“Blue, the bastard may have murdered your father; you have my support in finding him regardless of what you decide.”

“Thank you, Thomas.”

“You’re welcome, and tell Mr. Acero that I said hello.”

The phone went silent, and Lawson was gone.

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DARRELL HARKER, at twenty-six, was big, NFL lineman big. He was six-foot-six and three-hundred and eighty pounds. From the few photos included in Lawson's package, not all of it was fat.

In the photo taken for his commercial driver's license, his black hair looked as if it were seldom combed and his wide-set eyes were narrow slits of blue above a pock-marked and crooked nose.

"Three-hundred and eighty pounds? He's a monster," Ramón said.

"Yes, and in more ways than one. It says here that his parents sent him to live with his granduncle when they became afraid of him. It seems young Darrell didn't like rules and threatened to kill them in their sleep."

"So, they thought he was dangerous and still they sent him off to live with an old man?"

"Apparently, this was all discovered the last few days as the FBI interviewed them. Instead of seeking help for the boy, they simply shipped him off to the only relative that would take him. That unwittingly placed him in the midst of a serial killer."

"All right, but why would someone like Harker take the boy in? He doesn't sound like the grandfatherly type."

"If Lawson is right, the arthritis was getting worse by then and he probably needed help. So, a bad kid becomes schooled in the ways of serial murder."

"Do you believe he killed your father?"

"I do."

"Let me help you track him down."

I picked up the files and let them drop atop the coffee table.

"There are scores of agents looking for him and they have contacts and equipment that I can only dream of, my guess is that they'll find him any day now."

"And if they don't?"

I was suddenly exhausted. I stretched out on the sofa, resting my head atop of Ramón's thigh.

He stroked my hair and asked a question.

"What is it, Blue?"

"When my father disappeared, it was like my world ended. I was seventeen and the most important influence in my life just vanished.

His disappearance stayed a mystery for twelve years. Now we know what happened, but his killer is still out there somewhere. If the authorities fail to capture him, then I'll have to go look for him. That's a search that could take time, possibly years."

"And all you want to do is put it behind you and mourn," Ramón said.

I sat up and stared at him. "You understand that?"

"Yes, I understand wanting to move on; I've done it more than once myself."

I sat up, laid back in his arms, and crossed his hands over my stomach.

"Just hold me for a while, okay?"

Ramón answered by embracing me and kissing the top of my head. I fell asleep in the comfort and safety of his arms.

~

IN THE MORNING, I rose from bed early, causing Ramón to stir, but after I told him to go back to sleep, he closed his eyes and drifted off again.

After making coffee, I went out onto the patio at the rear of the home just after first light. I had a lot to think about and much to decide. It felt good to sit quietly and ponder it all. By the time Ramón padded downstairs in his bare feet, I had a clearer sense of what I wanted and needed to do.

Ramón and I kissed, and afterward, he settled in across from me with a steaming mug of coffee.

He stared at me. "You look more at peace this morning."

"I am, it's very tranquil here and I had time to think things through."

I waited for it, and when it didn't come, I smiled.

"What's so funny?" Ramón said.

"I gave you a perfect opportunity to bring up the subject of my moving in here and you passed on it."

"The last thing I want to be is tiresome, however, now that you've brought it up…"

I told him about the eviction notice I received and that the clock was ticking on my finding a new place. Ramón spread his arms wide.

"There's plenty of room here, and even if it's only temporary you're welcome to move in, who knows, you may never want to leave."

"I'm more worried about someday being asked to leave."

Ramón put his coffee mug down and leaned forward.

"What's the longest relationship you've ever had with a man?"

“That would be Gary.”

“And that lasted…?”

“Just shy of a year, does that worry you?”

“My track record is even worse, but then, none of those women were you.”

“Can I have more time to consider it?”

Ramón laughed. “You can take the rest of your life.”

~

LATER THAT MORNING, I returned home and discovered another missive had been slipped beneath my door. It was a second note concerning the eviction and it mentioned my failure to respond to the first notice. I sat down on the arm of my sofa and looked around at what had been my home for over ten years.

Along with the couch I sat on, there was a set of matching chairs, a coffee table, two bookcases, a TV, various paintings and bric-a-brac of little or no value, and a throw rug. There was a bedroom set in the other room and a dinette set in the kitchen. Besides my clothes, the bedroom closet also held two extra guns, a rifle, spare ammunition, and five-hundred dollars of emergency money in a coffee can.

All of it was either old or easily replaced and none of it meant anything to me.

My sister, who I always considered flighty, was now married and having a baby. Meanwhile, I was still living in a rented cubicle and chasing cheap crooks around Texas.

I once considered myself a woman with a plan. The plan was that I would retire from bounty hunting and own a ranch of my own by the age of forty. It was a good plan, but what about the years in between?

And just who was it that thought this plan up? It was my teenage self, that’s who; I was living my life based on the wants and desires of a teenager.

I still wanted a ranch someday, but I wanted so much more as well, like a stable relationship, possibly even children.

I sat there like that, lost in thoughts about life and living, until I noticed the time. I had plans to meet with Becca and I had been ruminating for so long that I’d be late. After a quick shower and a change of clothes I was out the door.

~

BECCA GAVE me an extra-long hug as she greeted me. I realized that it was because of all that was going on with the discovery of my father’s body.

“How’s your mama doing, Blue?”

“She’s good; we’ve all been expecting this news for a long time, but enough about sad things, let’s get this place ready.”

I was there to help decorate for a birthday party for Becca’s husband, Richie. Richie and Becca had been together most of their lives and seemed to grow more in love each year. I considered Richie the brother I never had. Despite being six-foot-four and muscular, he was also one of the gentlest men I knew, and he was a great father to their five kids.

After we hung the HAPPY BIRTHDAY RICHIE banner across the living room wall, Becca proclaimed the decorations complete. I joined her in the kitchen, where I watched her spread icing on a two-tiered cake.

“Ramón wants me to move in with him.”

Becca smiled. “I knew he was a smart man, are you considering it?”

“Yes, it’s just…”

“Just what?”

I gave a little shrug.

“He didn’t ask me to marry him, so it sorta feels like he’s leaving himself a way out.”

Becca swiped at my nose and left a dab of vanilla icing on its tip.

“Oh, you silly thing.”

I wiped off the buttercream icing with a napkin and scowled at her.

“Why am I silly?”

“If he had asked you to marry him this soon, you would have run the other way. Ramón is smart enough to know that, and so he’s going after you in increments.”

I opened my mouth to deny what she’d said and then closed it again.

Becca was right. If Ramón had spoken of marriage I would have run the other way, not immediately, but I would have backed away.

“I love him, Becca.”

“More than you loved Gary?”

“That’s not something I can quantify, but Ramón accepts me in a way that Gary never could. Ramón sees me for who I am and embraces it, Gary ran from it, out of fear for my safety, but he ran. How could I live with a man who couldn’t accept me?”

Becca swiped at my nose again, and this time it was chocolate.

“I have a better question for you. How can you stand to live apart from a man that *does* accept you?”

As I absently licked the icing from my fingers, Becca’s words echoed in my mind.

~

THE PARTY WAS GREAT. It felt so good to just kick back and have fun with my friends.

As usual, Becca's daughter, Amy, shadowed Ramón around. Amy was nine and had a crush on Ramón since the day they'd met. I watched him interact with her and with Becca and Richie's other children. He would make a great father.

As Richie opened his presents in the midst of his family and friends, Ramón leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"That Richie, he is the luckiest man I know. Look at the faces of these people, they all love him."

I whispered back. "Jealous?"

"Envious is more like it."

~

I HELPED BECCA CLEAN UP, and so Ramón and I were the last to leave.

After I climbed in my truck, he leaned in and kissed me.

"Are you coming by, or going home?"

"Home, I'm running down a list of skips tomorrow with George and Randy and we're getting an early start."

"Stay away from pig farms."

"Trust me, I will."

"Have you given Lawson's offer more thought? I think you'd make a hot federal agent."

"I'm still considering it… along with other things."

Ramón put his hands up. "I didn't mention it."

"I know, and I'm sorry that it's taking me so long to decide."

"You've got a lot on your mind these days."

I sighed. "That's for certain."

We kissed again, said our "I love you's" and drove off in separate directions. As Ramón's taillights disappeared in the distance, Becca's words echoed once more through my mind.

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GEORGE, Randy, and I spent the next morning checking the possible locations of several skips. By the time we decided to break for lunch, we had captured three men and two women. They were worth a grand total of twenty-five hundred each.

George and Randy always worked together and were often mistaken for brothers because they looked alike. They were actually cousins. Both were six-feet tall, with average builds, and had dark hair and mustaches.

As Randy joined George and me at our table, he smiled.

"Not a bad day's work, hmm?"

I nodded my agreement with a mouth full of cheeseburger and looked around at all the kids running about. We were at a fast food place just off State Highway 360 on a Saturday afternoon. As I took a sip from my soda, I glanced out the window and saw a face that I had just seen on a wanted poster that morning.

Actually, I had been seeing his face all week as his story and the story of "*Herd Thinner*" vied against each other for airtime on the nightly news. His name was Dirk Ward. He was a former football player suspected of murdering a woman in Vegas. Ward had skipped out on a million dollars in bail. The last report I heard said that Dirk Ward was thought to be in the L.A. area, but I'm good with faces, and men as big as Ward were few and far between.

I leapt up from the table, pulling Randy along as I went.

"The big blond guy parked at the light, and in a red Hummer of all things, am I crazy, or is that who I think he is?"

George spotted him first and nearly choked on his food.

"That's him, holy shit that's Dirk Ward."

We ran from the restaurant just as the light changed and Ward drove off. I jumped into my truck as the boys scrambled into Randy's Dodge and off we went in pursuit.

I gave Randy a call when I had Ward's Hummer in sight.

"What's up, Blue?"

"Let's not spook him and get caught up in a high-speed chase. I'll pass him as you guys follow from behind. When he gets where he's going, we'll take him down."

"It looks like he's headed into Arlington, and yeah, we'll play it

cool. If not for the bad knee, that guy would still be playing pro ball. He was a mean bastard too, Ward liked to put the hurt on quarterbacks just for fun."

"If he goes inside before we can get to him we call the cops and let them handle it, agreed?"

"Yeah, the bounty would be sweet, but I'd like to be around to spend it," Randy said.

We followed Ward for another twenty minutes and watched him pull into a gas station. I drove past him as Randy followed him inside the lot and pulled up close behind him at the pump. I spoke to Randy as I U-turned.

"Let's do it here. I'll block him in and we'll take him as soon as he steps out of the truck."

"That's good, he'll be watching you as you pull in and George and I can sneak up from behind, but be sure to make a lot of noise to grab his attention."

"Be careful, guys."

"You too, Blue."

I came flying into the station while blowing my horn, just as Dirk Ward emerged from the Hummer. He was big all right. It brought to mind the photos Lawson had sent me of the hulking Darrell Harker, *Protégée*, my father's killer.

We had hoped my arrival would distract Ward, but instead, it alerted him, and he jumped back into his vehicle. I swung open the door on my truck as Randy and George closed in from the rear.

Randy screamed at Ward, telling him that we were bounty hunters and that we were placing him under arrest.

Ward started his Hummer, jammed it into gear, and rammed my precious truck.

My daddy had given me the truck on my seventeenth birthday, and it is the only vehicle I have ever owned, a vehicle I probably spent more time in than my own apartment.

I was gripping the steering wheel and mashing my brakes. Despite that, the huge Hummer gave one final push and sent my truck rolling backwards.

The driver's side door was bent the opposite way as it struck one of the concrete posts that protect the pumps. At the same time, a rear tire rode up and over a corner of the fuel island. The impact jarred me. I lost my balance and tumbled from the truck and onto the ground.

I then watched in horror as my truck went rolling into the roadway while scattering cars. It disappeared from sight as it went down the hill backwards.

I whispered, "Oh no," and a moment later heard the sound of a

tremendous crash. I closed my eyes and prayed that my runaway truck hadn't harmed anyone. There had been no sounding of horns from the bottom of the hill, and so I had hope.

When I swiveled my head, I saw that George had run alongside the Hummer and managed to grab the keys from the ignition, causing the engine to die.

But when George pulled his hand back, Ward grabbed his wrist and broke it with a savage twist of his muscular arm.

George howled in pain and dropped the keys. They made a clinking sound as they hit the concrete and Ward got out of the truck to retrieve them.

As I made it back to my feet, Randy took aim at Ward.

"Hands above your head, now!"

I ran toward him while screaming, "No Randy, you might hit the gas pumps!"

I don't know if Randy heard me say it, but everyone else seemed to; there was a stampede of panicked drivers away from the pumps.

Ward bent over and I thought that he was retrieving his lost keys, but when he stood, he was holding George chest high. A moment later, he tossed George over the truck and straight at Randy.

I heard the distinct sound of bones breaking as the two men impacted and only hoped that it wasn't their skulls that had fractured. When I reached them, I saw that Randy's jaw was sitting askew and that George had a broken ankle to go with his wrist. Both of them were out cold, and Randy's gun had skittered away to only God knew where.

My own gun was still in my poor truck. I had it sitting handy beside me on the seat when I drove in, but had no chance to grab it before I had tumbled out from behind the wheel. If George had a gun, it wasn't in sight, and I saw no sign of a holster.

That's when the laughter began, as Ward's deep baritone mirth seemed to mock me while expressing joy at my friend's injuries.

The sound of it just plain pissed me off.

He stood at the rear of his vehicle staring at George and Randy with a look of pleasure. I called to him just as he turned to climb back into his Hummer.

"Hey! You've got one more here to deal with, you overgrown piece of shit."

Ward spun back around and looked me over as if I were mad.

"I'm calling you out, Ward. Are you going to fight or run?"

"Lady, I could break you in two."

He was right and I knew he was right, but the only alternative was to back down, and goddamn it but my daddy did not raise me to back down.

I sprinted toward him, leapt into the air, and brought the heel of my boot down hard on his left knee.

Randy had said something about the monster-sized man having a bad knee but hadn't mentioned which one. If I had attacked the bad knee, then he should be affected by my kick, if not, he might be merely enraged and follow through on his threat to break me in half.

It was the correct knee I'd attacked, the bad one. Ward's scream of agony echoed across the lot as he fell to the ground on the other knee. With him down on one knee, we were eye to eye. I pulled back my fist and struck him as hard as I could on his Adam's apple.

That caused him to fall back onto his ass and grab at his throat with both hands. As he sat like that, I kicked him again, and this time my boot found his testicles.

His right hand flew out and gripped my left. I watched my hand be swallowed within his meaty paw right up to the wrist. Next, I could feel the bones of my fingers grinding together. The pain was enough to make me scream.

A final kick to the throat removed all fight from him though, and he thrashed about on the ground, apparently unable to breathe.

I fell back against the Hummer, wincing at the intense pain in my hand, as the nearby howls of police sirens reached my ears.

"Hey lady?"

I turned my head and saw a teenage girl filming with her cell phone.

"Holy shit but that was awesome and I got the whole thing here on my phone."

I looked at Ward and saw that he had stopped moving, as drool fell from his open mouth.

When I walked back over to stare down at George and Randy, I was relieved to see that they were both breathing. Other than Randy's broken jaw, there appeared to be no serious injury to their heads.

I then sat down beside them as I waited for the ambulance to arrive, and wiped away the tears as they fell.

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THE REST of that day was a jumble of police reports and time spent in a hospital. There were also the continual efforts to avoid the media. Reporters went wild once the cell phone video of my takedown of the much larger Dirk Ward posted to the internet.

Ward was placed on a ventilator, but was expected to live. Although, his true condition was yet to be known until he woke up. His brain had been starved of oxygen until a paramedic performed an emergency tracheotomy on him right there in the gas station parking lot.

Randy had suffered a concussion to go along with his broken jaw, while George had a broken wrist and ankle. My left hand was mangled by Ward's grip, but appeared to have no broken bones, still, as a precaution, the emergency room doc placed it in a cast for two weeks. During that time, any micro cracks would heal properly.

Ramón joined me in the hospital as they were applying the cast. I was happy to see that he was worried about me, but not freaked out by what had happened. It was one of the things I loved most about him. Ramón knew I would sometimes face dangerous situations and trusted me to come out on top. Other than my father, no one has ever had such faith in my abilities.

Both Ramón and I had planned to spend the night at my place. However, when we arrived, we saw that there were two news vans parked in front of the apartment house, and so we went back to his home. After a quick shower, I stumbled into bed and fell asleep with Ramón holding me.

~

I AWOKE the next morning in a bed that more and more I was coming to think of as my own.

When I went downstairs, I found Ramón drinking coffee in front of the TV. On the screen, an angry woman was yelling at a man three times her size to stay and fight her.

The woman was me. I wondered if my mama had seen this yet and thought me insane. Then again, she always did say that I had inherited the Steele family grit. It was the same fortitude and pluck

that flowed through the veins of our famous cousins, the Calibers.

Ramón pointed at the screen. “I must have watched this a dozen times and I’m still amazed at how good you were. That big bastard never had a chance. By taking the fight to him, you gained the advantage of the element of surprise; that’s a huge weapon in any battle.”

I sat beside him on the sofa and poured a cup of coffee from a carafe.

“Things might have ended differently if I hadn’t gotten lucky and struck his bad knee. That blow would have hurt him anyway, but it might not have incapacitated him long enough for me to hit him in the throat.”

Ramón kissed me. “It’s not the fact that you won that makes me so proud of you, it’s the fact that you fought.”

I kissed him back, and when I looked at the television again, there were side-by-side photos of my father and me. The fact that we were both named Blue Steele seemed to fascinate the show’s hosts.

“Yeah,” Ramón said. “The name Blue Steele was already in the news because of your father, but now the video of you has highlighted it even more. They also mentioned that you’re related to Jake Caliber.”

“Jake is coming in for the funeral, as soon as they release Daddy’s body.”

Ramón smiled. “I look forward to meeting him in person, the man is a living legend.” After saying that, I saw Ramón’s face darken.

“What’s wrong?”

“They delivered your truck while you were asleep; it’s out front.”

“You think I’m crazy to want to get it fixed, don’t you?”

“Baby, if it were a lame horse it would be too far gone to even bother shooting.”

I was dressed in one of his T-shirts, but his robe was lying on a chair. I grabbed it and put it on to go outside.

The day was partly cloudy and seemed to fit my mood, but one look at my truck and the day darkened to midnight.

Ramón was right; my pickup was totaled.

After rolling down the hill yesterday, it had slammed backwards into the concrete abutment of a train overpass. It had hit with such force that the rear axle bent in half. The recoil from the impact then sent the truck wobbling forward, where it drifted to the right, rolled down yet another steep hill, while crashing into small trees along the way. It finally settled atop a clump of dry weeds. The heat from the engine set the weeds on fire, a fire that consumed the interior of my truck. If it weren’t for the familiarity of the alphanumeric combination of the charred license plate, I’m not sure I would have even

recognized it as my own.

When the tears began I hardly noticed, but then the floodgates opened and soon I was weeping so hard that I could barely breathe. Ramón guided me into the house and cooed soothing words as we lay together on the sofa.

When the tears were finally spent, Ramón gazed into my eyes.

"What's going on, baby? I know you loved that truck, but those were tears of true mourning."

"Those tears were for my father. All the years when we didn't know what had happened to him, and even after he was declared dead, there was still hope, you know? I had hope that he could still be alive somehow, then, when his body was found, that hope finally died."

I could tell by Ramón's expression that he now understood.

"He was gone, but you still had the truck he had given you, and that truck was like a daily reminder of his love, no?"

"Exactly, and now even that has been taken away."

Ramón sighed. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, and it means so much to me that you understand."

I dried my eyes and the two of us sat up and stared at the muted TV. A commercial was playing. On screen, a couple appeared to be ecstatic about the brand of toilet paper they were buying.

I took Ramón's hand in my one good hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I know that you said he died when you were still very young, but did your father ever give you anything?"

"He made a point of giving me something every day."

I turned my head and stared at him.

"What did he give you?"

Ramón gazed back at me.

"A beating, he gave me daily beatings, and I've no doubt that he got as much pleasure from dishing them out as your father received when he gifted you that truck."

"Jesus! Ramón, how did you survive that childhood?"

"I took life day by day, that is, until I met Walter and learned that there was more to living than survival."

"And now?"

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Now all I want is a future, and I want that future with you."

I stood, pulling him along, and we went upstairs and into the bedroom.

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THANKFULLY, the reporters were gone from the front of my building when I returned home that afternoon. Apparently, some new tragedy had lured them away.

A little while later, I knocked on the apartment manager's door and informed her that I would not be seeking to rent one of the new units. She told me that everyone else said the same thing.

Big surprise, if we could afford high-price apartments we would already be living in one.

My laptop was totaled in the fire that consumed my truck and so I was reduced to surfing the web on my phone. That's not the easiest thing to do when you've got one hand wrapped up in a cast.

While browsing for a new place to live, I soon discovered that vacant apartments were not hard to find, but they weren't giving them away either.

I made calls to a couple of places, and the apartment manager of a building on Saint Juliet Street said he could show me around if I wanted to come take a look.

I grabbed my purse, which thankfully had fallen out of the truck before the fire could consume it, and went out to get in my rental.

It was a car because they were out of trucks to rent. It felt odd to be driving so low to the ground. Along with a new apartment, I would need to find a new truck. I wiped away a tear, put the car in drive, and went to find a place to live.

~

THE APARTMENT WAS VERY nice and the building was much newer than where I was living now. The kitchen had a built-in dishwasher, something I have never had, and enjoyed using whenever I stayed at Ramón's house.

I actually liked the place a great deal. The only thing that made me hesitate to move ahead with it was the fact that it was the first place I had looked at. Maybe there was something better out there.

The manager saw my hesitation and wisely left me alone to make a decision. I walked the small apartment once more, while opening closets and cabinets, then I stood in the middle of it and thought

about the implications of renting a new apartment.

It was a one-year lease, with the option to sign for another year at its end. I thought of Ramón. If I took the apartment it would hurt his feelings, something I truly did not want to do.

I actually wanted to live with him, but the lack of a commitment, such as marriage, made the whole thing seem as transitory as a one-year lease.

Was Becca right? Was Ramón only asking me to move in because he feared that if he asked for more it would drive me away?

I didn't know if that were true or not, but I do know that if he had asked me I would have given it serious consideration. I loved him so much and it hurt each time we parted. If I moved in with him, perhaps we could take things to the next step, given time, and maybe someday even start a family.

In the end, I thanked the apartment manager for his time and said that I would think about it. He warned me that the "Units were going fast" and that I should get back to him soon.

When I went back outside, I found myself disoriented when I didn't see my truck, then I remembered with a crestfallen heart what had happened to it, and I headed toward my crappy rental car.

As I opened the door to climb in, I heard my name called, and it was being uttered by a very familiar voice. He walked up to me, smiling wide, and I greeted him with a grin of my own.

"Hello Gary."

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AS GARY SAT across from me in a coffee shop, I studied his face and thought that there was a quality of seriousness about him that wasn't there before.

We had only broken up a few months earlier, but in my heart and mind it felt much longer, still, I held great affection for him.

I pointed to the ring on his finger.

"Who's the lucky lady?"

Gary looked down at the ring and touched it.

"After you and I broke up, I got back together with Janelle."

"I see, and how is married life?"

"It was actually good this time."

"Was?"

Gary nodded, and after taking a deep breath, he spoke in a choked voice.

"Janelle is dead, Blue. She died along with two other people in an accident, a faulty elevator."

I reached across and took his hand.

"Oh my God, Gary, I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, you know, we had only been married a few weeks, but I could tell that this time we would make it. We had matured in the years we were apart, and it made all the difference."

"I'm glad that you were happy together; it's so unfair that you lost her."

His head shot up and he stared at me.

"Oh, speaking of loss, I see they found your father. I'm so sorry that it took so long for you to learn the truth. At least now you and your family can stop wondering what happened."

"Yes, that's the one bright spot."

He smiled, and I was reminded of how much I liked his smile and of the way it used to make my heart flutter. There was no flutter this time, and I wondered what relational alchemy had made it come and go.

"I've been seeing you on the news all day. You really showed Dirk Ward who was boss."

I sighed. "Is this where you tell me that I risk my life too easily?"

We were still holding hands loosely, but Gary gripped mine tighter,

as he pulled me toward him slightly.

"You'll never hear those words from me again. Look what happened to Janelle, she was killed on her way to a business meeting because of a freak accident. You do whatever makes you happy, Blue, and live life your way, do you hear me?"

I simply nodded, as his intensity left me too startled to speak.

He noticed my expression and released my hand while leaning back.

"I'm sorry; I just felt that was something I needed to say to you."

"I appreciate it."

We sipped at our coffee for a few moments before he spoke again.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"Yes."

"Is it serious?"

"Yes, it is."

"Good, you deserve to be happy."

We talked for a little while longer, but Gary had an appointment with a client that he had to make, and so we rose from our seats and went outside.

When we parted, we gave each other a clumsy kiss on the cheek and then went our separate ways.

Seeing Gary again was bittersweet and I felt sympathy for his loss. I barely knew Janelle, and at the time I knew her, we were rivals of sorts and shared feelings of animosity toward each other. She had been lively and vibrant, and now she was dead.

It made me realize how important each day is, and again I thought about the life plan I had been working at for years. Maybe it was time I planned less and lived more.

My phone rang, startling me from my thoughts; it was Ramón. As I answered it, I climbed inside my rental.

"You're not working today, are you, Blue?"

"No, actually… I was out looking at apartments."

"Ah, then I guess I have my answer."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, I understand that it's a lot to ask."

"It's not that, it's just, oh God, Ramón, I just feel at loose ends in every area of my life right now, you know?"

"I do."

"I know that you do, and you've been there for me every step of the way."

"I love you, Blue."

I smiled into the phone.

"Say it again."

"I love you, and it really doesn't matter where you live, as long as

you save a place for me in your heart."

"I'll come by later, okay?"

"You never have to ask, but why don't we eat out?"

"That sounds good."

I heard a beep, telling me that I had another caller. When I checked, I saw it was important.

"Ramón, I have to take another call; it's my mama."

"Give her my love, and I'll see you later."

I ended the first call and answered the second.

"Hi, Mama."

"Hey baby, is there a chance that you could come home tomorrow?"

"If you need me, of course, what's up?"

"We have to make plans, Blue, funeral arrangements, they finally released your daddy's body."

"I'll be there tonight, Mama."

"Thank you, baby, and don't eat, I've been cookin' all day."

My mother cooked a lot when she was stressed. I could imagine the feast she'd prepared.

"I love you, Mama."

"Me too, baby, now take your time and drive safe, and are you bringing Ramón with you?"

"I'll have to ask, but I'm sure he'll come along."

"Good, I like that fella a lot, and a smart girl would hang on to him."

"You didn't raise any dummies, Mama."

She laughed. "That's for sure, and Blue?"

"Yes?"

"Stop picking fights with large men; watching that video damn near gave me a heart attack."

"He started it."

"And damn if you didn't finish it, girl. I've said it before and I'll say it again, you are your daddy's daughter, and woe be to the man or woman that messes with you."

"Do you think Daddy would be proud of me, Mama, proud of what I do?"

"Now Blue, don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Your daddy was proud of you from the second you slipped from my womb and not a damn thing would ever change that, and it goes double for me. Now stop yakking and go pack a suitcase, the sooner you leave, the sooner you'll get here."

"Yes, ma'am, and I'll see you tonight."

I ended the call feeling good, and then I started my crappy rental

and drove home.

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WE BURIED my father on a cloudless day, amid family and friends that traveled to be with us from across the country.

My Caliber cousins were there, including Jake the fifth, who I hadn't seen since we were teenagers, and who taught me to smoke a cigar when I was sixteen.

Ramón thought it a wonder that the Calibers had stayed close to the Steeles, despite having moved to New York City decades ago. Our two branches of the family had always stayed in touch, and probably always would.

The media kept a respectful distance away, but images of our family coming and going from the services were shown on TV. One local station also made a new documentary about the original Jake Caliber, who was a legend of the old west. At the end of the program, they showed a representation of our family tree that traced our roots back to the Scottish Highlands.

From where my daddy was buried, you could see the statue of ol' Jake Caliber – The Man Who Never Missed. That statue marked his gravesite.

~

THE MORNING AFTER THE FUNERAL, Ramón and I came downstairs to find my sister and Chad already awake and making pancakes.

After breakfast, the four of us sat around and talked, and I learned what they planned to name their child.

"Blue? You're naming him after Daddy, that's so sweet and I know he would have loved it."

Jenny smiled at Chad. "It was my husband's idea, but I think he's just trying to stay on Mama's good side."

"Another Blue in the family, well now, you know that if you don't spoil him that I will."

Jenny smiled at us. "What about you two, any plans to have a baby?"

It was just like Jenny to ask that kind of question. She had inherited my mama's bluntness and so I couldn't blame her.

I took Ramón's hand. "No plans, but who knows what the future

holds."

Chad looked at both of us.

"Do you think you guys may marry someday?"

Ah, I thought, *Chad also has the blunt gene.*

Ramón answered him, and I heard the pain behind the words.

"I don't think Blue is the marrying type, at least not where I'm concerned."

I sat there staring at him, with my mouth slightly agape when my mama came downstairs and said good morning to us.

Jenny jumped up to make more pancakes and the conversation went off in another direction. I didn't bring up what Ramón said during the rest of the visit, and neither did he, but I realized that my refusal to move in with him had hurt him more than he let on. I felt like crap for it.

~

RAMÓN and I saw little of each other in the days following that, because he had to leave for Santuario to see to some minor crisis.

I used that time to examine my life and decide what it was that I now wanted to do with it. To my surprise, owning a horse ranch by the age of forty was not at the top of the list.

I had grown and matured in the years since I'd first chosen that goal, and forty now seemed a ridiculous age to mothball myself on a ranch, despite my love of horses.

Would I own a ranch someday? Maybe, even likely, but that day was far off. I decided that I had other priorities I wanted to pursue much more.

~

I HAD BEEN out truck shopping and was sure that I knew what vehicle I wanted next, but I decided to sleep on my decision for a night before going back to make the deal.

As I entered my apartment, a phone began ringing in my purse.

My own phone was sitting on my hip, and so I knew that it had to be the Lawson Hotline, as I had come to think of the phone he sent me.

"Lawson?"

"Hello, Miss Steele, have you given my offer any more thought?"

"I have, but I would like to meet with you in person before I commit."

"Why?"

"I want to look into your eyes as we set down the ground rules."

“I understand, but I assure you that the position is as good as I described it. This is a step up into another league, Blue, a league you’ve been ready for, and for some time I’d say. Your recent confrontation with Dirk Ward made that fact even plainer.”

“When can we meet?”

“I’m engaged in activities a few states away from you at the moment, but we’ll get together soon. Can I take your agreement to meet with me as a sign that you’ll accept the position?”

“If it’s as you presented it, yes.”

“Fantastic, you won’t be sorry, now, I actually called because I would like to assist you in finding *Protégée*.”

“From what they’re saying on the news, Darrell Harker is in the wind and the FBI is clueless about where to find him.”

“This is true, but is that also true for you? I was hoping that a woman of your abilities would have a different slant on the case.”

I sat down on the arm of my sofa.

“Lawson, I recently buried my father, and the rest of my life has been a mess as well. To tell you the truth, Darrell Harker has barely entered my mind.”

“Yes, I can see that, things have been in flux for you, haven’t they?”

“They have, but they’re also beginning to settle down, and these last few days I’ve made certain decisions, one of which was to accept your offer.”

“Thank you, but I want you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“Take another look at the material I sent you concerning *Protégée* and study it from a hunter’s viewpoint. If you’re the person I think you are, you’ll come up with an angle of pursuit that others missed.”

“I will do that, and in fact, it’s something I’ve been meaning to do.”

“Thank you, Blue, and welcome to the team.”

~

RAMÓN HAD RETURNED from Santuario and I went to his house that night to welcome him home. For once, I cooked, although my culinary skills are modest.

We were out on the patio. As we sipped on wine after the meal, I told him that I had accepted Lawson’s offer.

“Despite my concerns about the vagaries of federal bureaucracy, I think you’ve made the right choice. You’re too good at what you do to waste it on chasing down bail skips.”

“I expect it will be more challenging, but I think I’m ready for it.”

“You’re the best there is. It’s why Lawson made the offer.”

“So tell me, what was this minor crisis in Santuario?”

Ramón smiled. “Do you remember my friend Juan and his wife Marta?”

“Of course, my mouth still waters when I think about her enchiladas, and I loved their little girl Maria to death.”

“Marta has grown tired of small town life and wants to move here, but the rest of the town is sad because it means she’ll have to close their restaurant.”

I grinned. “That was the crisis?”

“It’s the town’s only restaurant and Marta knows how to make everyone’s favorite dishes.”

“So what solution did you come up with?”

“Walter came up with it. Marta will mentor the girl who helps out in the kitchen for a few months, and then she’ll take over the restaurant when they leave.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “That way, they’ll still receive an income and the town won’t lose their only restaurant.”

Ramón rolled his eyes. “And you thought that you grew up in a small town.”

I laughed, but after it faded away, we grew quiet. I realized that there were more gaps in our conversations since coming back from my mama’s house.

As if he had been reading my mind, Ramón brought up the remark he had made at the breakfast table the morning after the funeral.

“I apologize for that. It was petty and petulant, and even worse, I displayed self-pity.”

“You were also wrong. You are definitely a man I would marry, it’s just that my life has been in such a state of chaos lately that I’ve barely had time to think. I remedied that while you were gone, and did some hard, clear thinking.”

“About us?”

“Yes, and about Lawson’s offer, and other things, and on the way over here I realized something else.”

“What’s that?”

“I have to find *Protégée* if I’m ever going to have peace about what happened to Daddy. It amazes me that I haven’t been more pissed that the bastard is still roaming free out there.”

“As you said, things have been in a state of chaos, but I agree that it’s important you find him.”

“Those files Lawson sent me, are they still in your office?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I’m going to stay up all night and study them until I find something. Lawson believes that I might uncover a clue to his

whereabouts that others have overlooked, and he may be right about that. With any luck, I might be able to track down Darrell Harker soon."

Ramón glanced at his watch.

"It's still early, and those files aren't that thick, you should have enough time to go over them before bedtime."

I put down my wineglass as I shook my head.

"I've something more important to do before I start that."

"More important? What is it?"

I smiled. "It's you."

~

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, I climbed from the bed and left Ramón's side, to go downstairs into the small office he keeps.

By the time the sun came up, I had gone through everything several times and come up empty. I even surfed the web for any news stories or video involving *Protégée*, just in case they contained some fact not in the files.

I rose stiffly from the chair behind the desk, and after stretching, I walked out to the kitchen to make coffee. As it brewed, I strolled through the house aimlessly, as in my mind, I went over the known facts of *Protégée* once again.

Once the coffee was done, I poured a cup and went outside to sit on the patio. However, I was still too restless to settle in a chair, and so I wandered about the dew laden grass in my bare feet.

As the sun rose higher in the east, it caused the trees in front of it to cast long shadows across the ground. The intermittent shadows looked as solid as the bars of a prison cell when contrasted against the brilliant light that shined between them; it sent the dew to sparkling.

I stopped walking so suddenly that I caused my coffee to slosh back on me, but I was so taken aback by the realization forming in my mind that I hardly noticed the sting of the burn.

I whispered to myself.

"Bars, the house had bars on all the windows."

I dumped the rest of my coffee into the grass and rushed back into the office. Twenty minutes later, I was certain I had found the key to finding *Protégée*.

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FIVE NIGHTS LATER, I was in a small town just east of Helena, Montana, in the home of Darrell Harker's parents. Darrell Harker, who was otherwise known as *Protégée*.

I had been staying there alone for more than two days as I lied in wait, hoping for a chance to avenge my father. The home was worth nearly a million dollars and had six bedrooms and four full baths. The neighborhood was upper-middle class and so the homes on either side of the property were some distance apart from it.

The lawn outside was an immaculate green carpet and the furnishings inside the home were all high quality and beautiful. All the other houses in the area shared these qualities, but the Harker home had something that the other homes did not.

It had bars on the windows and security gates that fastened across the doors. Granted, the bars were remote controlled. They would slide back into hiding within decorative camouflage at the mere push of a button, but they were still bars. The security gates, although covered with fanciful filigree, were nonetheless constructed from wrought iron. They were swung shut across the home's doors every night.

The Harkers, Dr. Jim Harker and his wife, Louise, were people living in fear, and what they feared was their son.

I had looked at the news footage of the Harker's house several times and not noticed the incongruity of the bars.

Homes such as this, in affluent neighborhoods, rarely have obvious and intrusive security measures such as burglar bars. Their owners preferred to let electronic surveillance and security patrols deter crime.

However, the Harkers weren't concerned with discouraging strangers from making off with their valuables, they were fearful of their own son making good on the threat to kill them in their sleep.

Bars and gates had been installed in all five places they had moved to since the day they shipped off their son to live with his granduncle. Those measures had been employed religiously every night since without fail. Darrell Harker would inevitably track his parents to their new home and make his presence known. He never threatened them again, he didn't have to; the very fact that he had found them was threat enough.

The Harkers, both sixty, were re-interviewed after I brought the bars to Lawson's attention. They admitted that, yes, they still feared their son, thought him insane, and had shipped him off to the elder Harker's shabby double-wide trailer hoping never to see him again.

When the interview was over, Lawson pulled me aside and asked a question.

"You have a plan to use this to our advantage?"

"Yes, but we'll need the Harkers cooperation."

~

THE HARKERS AGREED to the plan, and the following afternoon they were interviewed live on a popular daytime talk show. They discussed their son's mental instability in detail and made a plea for him to turn himself in to the authorities for help. They also mentioned that they had sold their home and would soon be moving to an undisclosed location after changing their names. They said it was an effort to avoid the stigma of being the parents of *Protégée*.

When the interview ended, I turned to Lawson with a pained expression.

"Maybe that was a little too heavy-handed; I mean the man's not an idiot."

Lawson sent me a small smile.

"The story isn't far-fetched. Dr. Harker told me that they've thought of changing their names, but that it would have put him at a disadvantage career-wise, being a renowned surgeon."

"I can see that; he's built up a reputation under his own name."

"Yes."

"Your people will be staying back, right, until I call them?"

Lawson said, "Yes," and then handed me a large envelope.

"What's this?"

"That, Miss Steele, will officially make *you* one of my people."

I opened the envelope and found credentials that contained a badge and a photo ID. They identified me as Blue Steele, Special Agent for Homeland Security.

I stared at the badge. It was something I thought I would never carry, even as a police officer, and now I had suddenly leapfrogged to federal agent.

Lawson offered his hand. "Welcome aboard, Miss Steele."

I shook his hand.

"Call me Blue, boss."

~

THE PART about the Harkers moving again was true, but they had no plans to change their names. If they had, they would hardly have gone on national television to show their faces.

However, I thought the risk that *Protégée* would see through that was worth the effort to make it seem to him that time was running out. If his parents were right, he intended to kill them. The only thing that had held him in check all these years was the fact that he knew he would be the number one suspect.

Now that he was already a known killer and wanted for murder, becoming a suspect no longer mattered one whit. Still, Darrell Harker couldn't be sure that he could find them again if they began using aliases, and so, if he were going to kill them, he had to do it soon.

~

I WAS PACING IN THE HARKERS' darkened living room, while jacked up on caffeine and trying to stay alert. I'd been getting in catnaps during the daylight hours, but spent the nights listening to the darkness, as I waited for my trap to be sprung.

The Harkers had been shipped off to another location by Lawson, and although I was alone in the house, there was help nearby and just a phone call away. I didn't plan on making any calls until the job was done and I had *Protégée* captured and cuffed.

I missed Ramón fiercely, although we talked at least once a day, but being apart from him physically was something we had done a lot of lately for one reason or another. I looked forward to things finally settling down, which they would do eventually if I could only get my hands on *Protégée*.

Speaking of hands, I had the cast removed from mine the day before I entered the house. I was flexing it in an effort to relieve some residual joint stiffness when I heard the faint scrape of a shoe come from outside a nearby window.

The home had motion detectors to go along with the bars, gates, and cameras, but *Protégée* must have by-passed them somehow and made it to the house undetected.

The bars were in place at the windows because we thought their sudden absence might signal that this was a trap. I stood and listened as I wondered how *Protégée* planned to gain entry to the home.

He had promised his parents that he would kill them in their sleep and so that meant the bedroom, which was upstairs. I was tiptoeing up the steps when I heard the *WHOOSH!* as flames instantly surrounded the home and lit the dark with a ghastly, flickering orange light.

It seemed *Protégée* had no plans to break into the home, not when

he could kill them in their sleep by simply burning the house down around them.

I bolted back down the stairs and realized that the exterior of the house was already engulfed in flames. Whatever he had used as an accelerant was brutal in its efficiency. Within seconds, the carpet and drapes inside the home began to catch fire, as windows shattered from the intense heat of the blaze.

I ran back up the stairs and looked out through the bedroom window. Even the surrounding lawn was on fire, which meant that jumping to safety was not an option.

I was trapped in a home set ablaze by the man who killed my father. If I didn't think of something quick, I would soon join his list of victims.

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I RUSHED back downstairs as a plan of escape formed in my mind. I had been gone for only seconds and already the smoke was thick, while flames engulfed the window curtains.

I sprinted for the kitchen, where I grabbed the keys hanging by the back door, a back door that was making crackling sounds like a log in a fireplace.

The keys were actually hot and burnt my palm, but I barely noticed as I ran back the way I had just come. What had my attention were the flames that filled the hallway I needed to travel through.

The walls on both sides of the hall had been decorated by small oil paintings depicting the French countryside. They had looked very nice; now fire traveled along those picture frames, and seemed to leap from one to the other.

I got down on my hands and knees and crawled as low as I could as I headed for a doorway in the middle of the hall, by the time I reached it, the heat was so intense that it felt as if my skin might begin to blister at any moment.

I reached up, turned the knob on the door, which was surprisingly cool to the touch, and then shoved the door open. The sudden burst of new air fed the flames and I could smell my hair burning. I lunged through the open doorway, tumbled headfirst down a flight of four wooden steps and lay on my back in the attached garage.

When I recalled the scent of my hair burning, I began to roll about, but the flames had already died. My hair is long, and when I examined it, I found that the ends had been seared by flames. Those same flames were spreading into the garage in an attempt to mingle with their brethren eating away at the garage door.

I gathered up the car keys I dropped when I'd fallen and looked for the one that would fit Mrs. Harker's *Subaru*, which was the only car left in the garage.

As I opened the car door, I noticed the vehicle was coated with dust. Apparently, Dr. Harker did most of the driving. I put the key in the ignition and said a silent prayer before I turned it.

If the car didn't start, I was dead.

I turned the key.

Nothing, not even a click from the battery, but then I saw it; the

car's gear shifter had been left in REVERSE. I jammed it into PARK, turned the key again, and yelped for joy as the engine came to life. Next, I tried to raise the garage door with the car's remote. When nothing happened, I realized that the fire must have damaged some vital component, such as the wiring. I would just have to open the garage door the hard way.

I put the car in DRIVE, mashed the gas, and collided with the burning door. It bent outward but just barely, and so I backed up and did it all again. On the third try, the car pushed under the heavy door and strained to be free of it, as the windshield cracked and the roof buckled from the large door's significant weight.

When I finally made it through, I drove in and out of a wall of flames and entered pure clean air. I then lowered the windows and took in deep gulps, as the anxious shouts of the Harkers' neighbors drifted to me.

I gazed about for *Protégée*, and that's when I noticed him staring at me with a gun raised to fire.

I ducked down, turned the wheel in his direction, and headed toward him across the grass. Two shots clunked uselessly into the car. When I peeked out over the dashboard, I saw that *Protégée* had turned to flee toward the back of the house.

He was fast for a big man, but the car was faster still. I clipped him with the fender just as he made it to the tree line at the rear of the property. The force of the impact should have broken his leg, but still he kept going, hobbling off into the woods.

I abandoned the car to follow on foot and *Protégée* turned to fire at me. However, he was well lit by the car's headlights, and those same lights were blinding him. I fired twice before he could get off a round.

One bullet struck him in the hip, while the other hit him high up in the ribs. He was lying on his back, wincing at the agony of his wounds, when I yanked the gun from his hand.

I stared down at the man who had taken my father away, the man who had killed my daddy.

I saw a glint of recognition light Harkers' eyes as he stared up at me.

"You're the daughter, right, the daughter of that Texas Ranger?"

"His name was Blue Steele."

"He was my first, and he never saw it coming."

"That's because he was there to help you, you son of a bitch!"

Harker made a cry of pain, then spoke in a breathless voice.

"Arrest me already, but first, get me an ambulance."

I had planned to arrest him, I really had, or at least… that's what I told myself.

I shot him first in the heart and then the head, and watched as he

died. I felt no pleasure from it, but simply relief. It was over, it was finally all over and there would be no long drawn out trial, no endless appeals, and no more lingering anguish for my family.

I took out my phone. When Lawson answered, I could hear him sigh.

"Those flames had me worried, Blue."

"You're here?"

"Nearby, and *Protégée*?"

"Dead."

"We'll be there in a few moments. Do you need medical attention?"

"No, but I do need to see my hairstylist."

"If the local cops arrive before I get there, say nothing. This case falls under Homeland's umbrella."

"Just do the job and go home?"

"That's right."

"Thank you, Lawson. I think this was something I needed to do."

"You're welcome, and I will see you soon."

I stayed to the trees and drifted up toward the front, making it there just as the fire engines arrived. The house was a total loss. If they didn't act fast, the fire could spread to other homes by way of hot ash drifting upon the wind.

The police arrived just after the fire department and paid me no attention, but I did receive a few odd looks from some of the neighbors gathered to watch the flames.

When Lawson arrived in a black Town Car, there were three dark SUV's with government plates following along behind him. Several men in suits jumped out of each vehicle and began flashing their credentials as they took over the scene.

I joined Lawson in the rear of the Town Car.

"Your arrival was impressive."

"It's meant to be; it discourages dissent from the local authorities."

I let loose a sigh.

"I hope you don't need me tomorrow, because I have a big day planned."

"Anything I can help with?"

"No, I'll just be tying up some loose ends."

"Where to?"

"The airport, I need to get home."

"We'll take my jet; I have a meeting in Dallas tomorrow."

"That works for me."

Lawson wrinkled his nose.

"First, we'll stop by your motel and give you time to shower and change."

“I do stink of smoke, don’t I?”

“It was close back there, wasn’t it?”

“It’s always close, Lawson; the trick is to come out on top.”

He smiled at me. “You do the trick quite well.”

A short time later, we boarded the jet and settled in. If Lawson was hoping for conversation, he was disappointed. I slept all the way home, and it was the best sleep I’d had in weeks.

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I HAD RETURNED my crappy rental before leaving for Montana, and so I caught a cab from the airport and had it take me to the cemetery.

There was a stone bench near my daddy's grave. I sat on it and gazed across at his tombstone, a tombstone that bore my name.

"Hey, Daddy."

I talked to him then, telling him about my life, the struggles I'd been through, the happiness, the pain, the joys, and even the disappointments. I pledged to him that I would always look after Mama and Jenny and broke the news that he would soon be a grandfather. I also let him know that the baby would be named Blue.

Now, I don't know if he heard a blessed word of what I said, but I do know that it brought a peace to my heart that I hadn't felt in ages. When I left there, I was ready to move forward with my life.

~

AFTER THE CEMETERY, I had the cab drop me off at a local charity, where I arranged to have them come by my apartment and collect my furniture. It was all old stuff, and in the spirit of new beginnings I was getting rid of it. They didn't seem too happy about the short notice, but said that they would be by later that day, likely around six p.m.

~

MY NEXT STOP WAS HOME, where I called my hairstylist, Gloria, for an emergency appointment. She was able to fit me in that afternoon, which was perfect, because I could use the time in between.

I had ordered my new truck before leaving, and it had arrived at the dealership while I was away. The paperwork was already signed. All I needed to do was drive it away.

My apartment was about two miles from the truck dealership down the road and I decided to walk there rather than call a cab. The sun was up high by that point and the weather was beautiful. As I made the trek, I gave Ramón a call.

"Is it over?"

"It's over."

“How are you?”

“I’m good, better than I’ve been in a long time.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I’m in Fort Worth already; Lawson flew me back on his jet.”

“I want to see you.”

“Me too, but I’ve got errands to run, such as picking up my new truck.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“I’ll come by later, how does eight o’clock sound?”

“It sounds great, and I’ll grab some Massaman Curry from that Thai restaurant you like.”

“Yummy.”

“Blue?”

“Yes?”

“Are you staying overnight?”

I smiled. “Yes, I certainly hope to.”

“Good, I love you.”

“I love you too, Ramón, bye-bye.”

~

I LEFT the dealership in a new Ford F350 pickup that cost more than I’d made most years. It was tuxedo black with a tan interior they liked to call adobe. It was fully loaded with everything under the sun.

I paid for it outright. I wanted to own it and not have to worry about payments.

My old self would have cringed at such an extravagant expense and measured the cost of it as a delay toward owning a ranch. My new self just reveled in the joy of driving the shiny new beast. I laughed aloud from the sheer pleasure of it.

~

RON TENNEY GAVE me a warm embrace as I entered his office. He hadn’t seen me since the incident with Dirk Ward.

He was surprised when I told him that I was quitting bounty hunting. When he asked me what I planned to do next, I showed him my federal credentials. He beamed with happiness.

“I’m proud of you Blue, and you know something, girl, Ruby would be proud of you too.”

Ruby Wheeler was the woman who had introduced me to bounty hunting and trained me.

“I hope she’d be proud; and thank you for saying that you are as well.”

Ron took me by the shoulders and stared into my eyes.

"You are the best bounty hunter I ever knew, and you'll make a hell of an agent."

"Thank you."

"Now don't you be a stranger and forget all about us, you hear?"

"I hear you, Ron, and thank you for all you've done for me over the years."

I gave him a kiss on the cheek and he waved me out.

"Get going before you make me cry."

"All right, and I'll see you around."

He said, "You'd better," as he wiped a tear from his eye.

~

NEXT STOP WAS the Lone Star Mall and my hair appointment.

Gloria broke the sad news to me, that to make my hair look right again she would need to cut off about four inches, those four inches were in addition to the singed ends I had already cut off.

I am very vain about my hair, but thankfully, it does grow quickly, so I told her to do what she thought was best. While she went to work on my hair, I also got a manicure and a pedicure.

Afterward, I went shopping and bought a new red dress and shoes with stiletto heels. It was a scandalously short and slutty dress, and I hoped that it would drive Ramón mad with lust.

As I looked at myself in the dressing room mirror, I found that I actually liked my new hairstyle, maybe I'd keep it shorter, after all, I was closing in on thirty.

~

I HAD JUST LOADED the last box of my belongings in the back of my new truck when the guys from the charity arrived to pick up the furniture I was donating. As one of the men left carrying the final piece, he looked back inside the apartment.

"Lady, there's nothing left."

I smiled.

"That was the plan."

~

ONCE THEY WERE GONE, I showered again and put on my red dress. As I smoothed a wrinkle out of it, I noticed that my hand was shaking.

I was nervous, and with good reason.

~

RAMÓN OPENED HIS FRONT DOOR, looked me over, and said one word.

"Wow!"

I giggled; it was exactly the reaction I had hoped for.

He pulled me inside and kissed me deeply. When we parted, I asked a question.

"Would you still like a roommate?"

His smile lit up the night.

"Oh absolutely!"

"I want to live with you, but I have one condition."

"Yes?"

I placed my arms around his neck and stared into his eyes.

"Will you marry me?"

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BLUE STEELE – ON THE HUNT - Book 5 of the Blue Steele Series

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SIX MONTHS after I asked Ramón to marry me, I found myself sitting alone in a bar, hoping to find a man to take back to my motel room.

I was in Port Byron, Illinois, of all places, a town of less than two-thousand people.

The tavern was nice and reminded me of a place we have back home. I was seated on a corner stool at the bar. In the three hours I'd been sitting there, four men walked over and offered to buy me a drink.

I told all four, "No," and each time wondered why they didn't just sit down beside me and tell the bartender to bring me a drink.

They were too timid, and as the saying goes, faint heart never won fair lady. And if I do say so myself, I was a fair lady.

I was dressed in a short green silk skirt with a black lace top that displayed an enticing view of cleavage, and my make-up was sexy, but not slutty. It was a Tuesday night and so the pub wasn't exactly rocking. But then, in a town of two-thousand, how raucous can it get?

The bartender was very cute, but barely out of his teens and what I needed that night was a man. Still, the kid kept me well supplied in peanuts and only spoke to me once out of politeness.

"Hi, I'm Billy."

"Hello there, Billy, I'm Blue."

"Blue? That's a cool name."

I grinned.

"You don't know the half."

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"I sure am."

"Who might that be, maybe I know them."

"I'm waiting for Mr. Right."

"Oh, I see, well, the pickings are slim here tonight. Most of these guys are either married losers looking to score or old geezers."

I smiled. "Why aren't you nominating yourself?"

He looked me over and sighed.

"I would if I was able, but I got a girl already."

"Do you treat her right?"

He smiled as if to himself.

"I sure try to."

“Do you think you’ll marry her someday?”

“Oh yeah, once we leave college.”

“Marriage doesn’t scare you?”

“No.”

“Is does some men, in fact, some men run the other way.”

The waitress called Billy’s name. She was standing at the opposite end of the bar and needed a drink order filled.

“I’ve got to get back to work, Blue.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Billy, and take care of that girl of yours.”

“I will, and good luck finding Mr. Right.”

~

MR. RIGHT WALKED in just as I was beginning to think he never would.

He was in his forties, but had a trim, athletic build, along with a classically handsome face. His hair was dark, and his eyes were a bright shade of green.

He stepped inside the bar and looked around for what seemed like a long time, before releasing the door and finally entering. The other women in the place looked him over and smiled, as their eyes followed his every move. He appeared to be as out of place as I did. I hoped that we would soon look out of place together.

When he noticed me, his eyes roamed over every inch and when the appraisal was complete, he smiled.

I smiled back at him, and then mouthed the word, “Hi,” but to my surprise, he took a seat at the other end of the bar.

That’s right, play hard to get.

Billy the bartender had been in the kitchen. When he returned to the bar by walking through a pair of swinging doors, Mr. Right sat up straight and began watching him with rapt attention. As Billy walked over to take his drink order, Mr. Right gave him a warm smile.

Perhaps Mr. Right was looking for a Mr. Right of his own? But no, I doubted it, not given the way he had eyed me.

As I sat and patiently sipped on my third, and then my fourth drink of the night, Mr. Right engaged Billy in a long intermittent conversation and showed a definite interest in the young man. Just as I thought I was forgotten, Mr. Right walked over and sat beside me, while instructing Billy to bring me a drink.

I hoped the other men in the bar were paying attention because that was the way to do it. Be bold.

“Billy tells me that your name is Blue.”

“That’s right, and what’s your name?”

He smiled. “I’m John Smith.”

“Oh really?”

“Does my name matter?”

I smiled. “Not in the least.”

We talked for a few minutes and then left the bar together, but not until he gifted Billy with a huge tip.

Once we were outside, I looked around at the quaint town and again thought that it would be a great place to live. Having grown up in a small town, I knew that intimate sense of belonging that living in one could instill; it was something that those raised in big cities didn’t readily enjoy.

Despite the coolness of the breeze coming off the river, I felt better out in the night air, but I had more to drink than was normal for me and could feel the effects. That said, I was far from drunk, or even intoxicated, and the anticipation of what was to come was more potent than the depressing effects of the alcohol.

My motel was a short drive away and we arrived there in minutes. After I opened the door with the key card and turned on the light, Mr. Right stood in the doorway and gave the room a careful appraisal, just as he had given the bar upon entering.

There wasn’t much to see, just the one room with a queen-sized bed and the bathroom on the left.

When he finally entered, I was stretched out atop the bed and smiling up at him.

“Well, Mr. Smith, what are you waiting for?”

He laughed, locked the door, and crawled atop the bed to lie beside me. As he moved his hand along my hip and toward my breasts, I brought out the stun gun I’d hidden beneath the pillow and blasted him on the back of his neck.

He went rigid from the current and I hit him with it a second time. I then grabbed the handcuffs that were hidden beneath the bed and bound his hands behind him, before removing the gun that sat in a holster on his back.

By the time he was returning to normal, I had his knees and ankles duct taped together and a gag taped firmly in place in his mouth.

Above the tape, his eyes were two pools of rage as he muttered threats that were unintelligible.

In truth, he looked little like the man I was after, who should be blond, blue eyed, and have a narrower chin and longer nose; still, hair can be dyed, contacts worn, and plastic surgery performed.

I reached under the pillow again and brought out the gadget that Lawson supplied me with. It was about the size of a deck of playing cards and looked like a cell phone. After turning it on, I bent down and pressed the screen against his right thumb. I had to do it three times because he struggled, but I managed to get a print that wasn’t

smudged too badly.

Several seconds passed after I pressed the button marked, COMPARE, and a green light illuminated on the device.

"It's a match, Mr. Smith. That means you're really William Stinett."

The fight went out of the man then, perhaps up until that moment he thought he was simply being robbed.

I took out my phone and called Lawson.

"Any luck, Blue?"

"Yes, I have him. I have William Stinett."

"Are you safe?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in a motel room just outside the village of Port Byron, Illinois."

"*Port* Byron?"

"Yes."

"We expected him to be in Byron, Illinois, where the nuclear power plant is."

"The similarity in names is just a coincidence, but I'll explain that later."

"Right, I'll send a pick-up team immediately, better yet, I'll join them."

I gave Lawson my exact location and ended the call. Afterward, I went into the bathroom where I could keep an eye on Stinett via the mirror on the dresser, and yet avoid his venomous gaze.

I washed the make-up off quickly and changed into the clothes I had left sitting atop the toilet tank. In the mirror, I saw Stinett wriggle around at the foot of the bed as he struggled against his bonds. The effort was wasted, and he soon gave up.

Once I had changed into a pair of comfy jeans and a white lace, peasant blouse, I dialed my phone again. A voice soon answered, Ramón's voice, the voice of my dear husband.

"Hi, Blue."

"Hi, baby."

"Does this call mean you're coming home soon?"

"It does; I found the man I was after and brought him back to my motel room."

"I would be jealous, but I suspect things didn't turn out the way he'd hoped."

"Not unless he was hoping to be handcuffed while wearing a gag."

Ramón laughed. "There are those who enjoy such things."

I laughed along while thinking how much I loved him.

After I'd proposed to Ramón, he'd said, "Yes, I would love to marry you, would you love to marry me?" I immediately said yes in return

and then the two of us giggled like children as we embraced.

We married only a few weeks later and I've been happier than I ever thought possible.

"What time will you arrive home?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but I should make it back by morning. I could stay here tonight and catch up on sleep, but I'd rather get home as soon as possible."

"I've missed you. The days seem like months when you're gone."

"Tell me about it, but now I'll have some down time."

"We could go see your sister again, and baby Blue."

My sister Jenny had given birth to the most beautiful little boy in all the world. He was named after my daddy, just as I was, and the little rascal had inherited our green eyes.

"We were there not too long ago, but you haven't been home in a while, why don't we visit Santuario and see Walter?"

"Walter would love to see you too, so yeah, we'll spend a few days there, but I also have a present waiting for you at home."

I grinned. "You're going to spoil me."

"A man can never spoil his wife too much."

"Nor a wife her husband,"

We talked a little longer, and afterward, I went back and sat on the end of the bed to keep an eye on Stinett.

~

ONCE LAWSON ARRIVED, William Stinett was carted off by a quartet of black-clad men with guns.

Stinett had been wanted by the FBI for twenty years, because back in 1994 he was the mastermind of a plot to set off a dirty bomb inside a nuclear power plant. The bomb wouldn't have caused much damage to the plant but would have likely led to the plant becoming impractical to operate. High levels of radiation would have flooded all workstations.

Stinett's plan was foiled before he could enter the plant and he murdered a security guard and escaped. When his abandoned device was dismantled, it was found to contain Caesium-137, a highly radioactive substance that was not easy to come by. The substance was something that should have been impossible for a radical college student to acquire, which is what Stinnett was then.

After disappearing for a time, Stinett resurfaced in Cuba and was later thought to be living in Venezuela. The FBI and the CIA have always wanted the answer to the question of where Stinett acquired the Caesium-137. Now that they had him, it was certain that they would get the answer, one way or another.

Lawson sent me a smile as we sat in the rear of a black SUV headed for the airport.

Thomas Lawson was probably in his forties but appeared very fit and could possibly be years older than he looked. He once told me that he had never been a field agent. I thought that he would make a great spy, or a poker player, because his face usually betrayed nothing of what he was feeling.

Since I started working for him, I found him to be an easy person to deal with, and I'd also come to suspect that he wielded immense influence and power. If he had a boss it wasn't evident, and I'd seen powerful people act wary around him.

He never mentioned his personal life, and probably had little time for one. The man was an enigma, but I liked him very much and I considered him a friend.

"Once again, Blue, this was excellent work, but tell me, how did you know that Stinett would show up here in this town?"

"I didn't know for certain, but I played a hunch, and the hunch was that he had slipped back into the country for something other than a desire to wreak havoc."

"And what would that something be?"

"His son, he wanted to see his son."

"William Stinett doesn't have a son."

"He does, he's a young bartender back in Port Byron named Billy."

I took out my phone and showed Lawson the picture I had surreptitiously taken of Billy while I was at the bar.

He studied it.

"If I didn't know better, I would say that was an old photo of Stinett."

"Yes."

"How did you discover that he had a son?"

"Billy's mother was Ellen Campbell, Stinett's college girlfriend. She was found to be innocent of collaborating with him at the time Stinett fled the country. Not long after that, she dropped out of school, then married an older man, a professor at the college she formally attended; his name was Keith Jeffries. Jeffries is listed as Billy's father on the birth certificate. He passed away from a heart attack when Billy was fifteen."

I saw Lawson smile and knew he was beginning to understand.

"Ellen Campbell-Jeffries died last month," he said. "The FBI had people staking out her grave just in case it was Stinett's destination, but the odds of that were thought to be low."

"They had the destination wrong, but the reason for his visit was an emotional one. Stinett is known to be an atheist who doesn't believe in an afterlife. I strongly doubted that he would risk his

freedom to visit a gravesite. Still, the timing of Ellen Campbell's death did seem to be the catalyst that made him leave his sanctuary. When I studied the file the FBI has on her, I found an old photo of her taken with her son when he was six. I thought there was a resemblance to Stinett."

"And so, you tracked Billy down to Port Byron?"

"Yes, and I spent the last four days keeping tabs on him. Then tonight, I decided to venture inside the bar because the intel said that Stinett was definitely in Illinois."

"Yes, we deciphered part of a coded text that mentioned the words Illinois and Byron, so naturally we began thinking of the nuclear power plant in Byron Illinois, not a bar in Port Byron."

"Stinett wasn't here to cause trouble; he was here to lay eyes on his only son. Either Ellen Campbell got word to him about Billy before she died of cancer, or with her death, someone decided to share the secret with him. Either way, Stinett risked himself so that he could see his son."

"And this Billy, did he appear to know who Stinett was?"

"No, I would guess that Billy still thinks Professor Jeffries was his father."

"We'll keep it that way; I see no point in disrupting his life by letting him know he's the son of a domestic terrorist."

"And what will happen to Stinett?"

"He'll be interrogated and likely spend the rest of his life in a cell somewhere, while he pays for the murder of the guard he killed."

"I used to bring in bail skips and see them back on the street just weeks later."

"The stakes are higher in your new profession, but then, so are the risks."

"I've no complaints, and I must admit, it's nice to have access to your resources; without the intel you provide, I never could have found Stinett."

"I'm glad you appreciate it, because I have a packet of it waiting for you on the plane."

I stared at Lawson.

"You told me I would have some time off if I found Stinett."

"And you will, weeks in fact, barring emergencies, but the package will contain details of your next assignment. I can tell you right now that she's the toughest target you've ever gone after."

"She?"

"Study the packet at your leisure and then get in touch."

"I take it the woman is dangerous?"

"Yes, and she actually managed to elude our mutual friend, Dr. White's husband, although at the time he was preoccupied with

capturing the serial killer Robert Michael Rothman."

"Rothman? Then that would mean the woman is—"

"Victoria Belle, yes, and she's as unpredictable and dangerous as they come."

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I ARRIVED HOME JUST before dawn and Ramón came out to meet me.

After hugging and kissing each other in greeting, he grabbed my bags and we entered our house. It felt so good to be home. It was wonderful to have an actual home and not just an apartment where I slept when not working.

Married life agreed with me more than I could have hoped for, but I knew it was because I had chosen my mate well, and not anything to do with the institution itself.

Although my new profession as a special agent took me away from home for days, and once, even weeks, it conversely came with long breaks of down time. After spending the last ten years hustling around the state of Texas in a steady pursuit of bail jumpers, the frequent breaks were welcomed. They allowed me a lot of time to enjoy life with my husband.

I had kept my maiden name after marrying, a decision I reached partly at Ramón's insistence. He said that my name fit me perfectly and that it would be a shame to change it just for the sake of custom. However, Ramón's surname was Acero, which meant Steel in Spanish, and so one way or another I would always be Blue Steele.

After pouring a mug of coffee, I leaned back against the kitchen counter and smiled.

"Where's this surprise you mentioned?"

"It's outside, and I think you're going to like it."

"Show me."

He grinned and pointed out the back window.

"I'm a little surprise that you haven't noticed it already, but then, the sun has just risen."

I put down my mug, turned around to look, and saw that there was a brand-new building on our property. It looked suspiciously like a stable.

I jerked my head back around and stared at him.

"You didn't? Oh my God, are there horses too?"

He began laughing at my reaction.

"Of course there are horses."

I smothered him with kisses, and then I was practically dragging him out the patio door.

“Let’s go look.”

On the way there, I began to wonder about the quality of horses that he had gotten. Ramón was new to riding and still had much to learn.

I need not have concerned myself, because when I looked in the stalls, I saw two old friends.

“Midnight and Willow? We own Midnight and Willow?”

Ramón was beaming.

“We do now. John and Candace were kind enough to sell them to us.”

John and Candace were John and Candace Miller, owners of the neighboring farm and new friends. They owned several horses and had offered to let Ramón and I ride on their property.

I had fallen in love with a quarter horse named Willow, while Ramón preferred to ride an Arabian named Midnight, and now we owned them. It was like a dream come true.

I scratched Willow behind the ear as I looked about the small stable in wonder.

“Oh my God, I know we talked about doing this, but how did you get this done in only four days?”

“A lot of planning and a lot of money, but it’s all worth it to see that look on your face.”

“They have to be cared for too, you know.”

“It’s all arranged. The Miller’s farm hand, Henry, I placed him on a small retainer so that he’ll take care of the horses. It works out great for him; he was already taking care of them at the Millers anyway.”

I went to Ramón and hugged him.

“This is the most fantastic gift ever, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, and I know it’s not your own horse ranch, but it’s a start.”

I was so happy that I started to cry, and Ramón wiped at the tears.

“I hope these are tears of joy?”

“They are. I can’t tell you how much this means to me.”

Ramón brushed back my hair as he stared into my eyes.

“Are you happy, baby, I mean truly happy?”

“More than I thought possible.”

“Do you know what’s scary?”

“What?”

He kissed me.

“We’ve only just begun.”

“You mean it will get even better?”

“That’s my plan.”

I took his hand.

“Let’s go inside and I’ll show you how much I missed you.”

He grinned wickedly and pulled me down upon a pile of hay.

I looked around.

“Here?”

Ramón made a neighing sound, even as his hands began unbuttoning my jeans.

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THAT EVENING, I set in our home office and looked over the package that Lawson had given me concerning Victoria Belle.

Victoria Belle was a female serial killer, a human predator. Unlike Rothman and others of their ilk, she never sought to blend in with society, to live life in a mask of normalcy. Her entire existence appeared to serve only her desire to kill, and her victims, both male and female were believed to be many, possibly even over a hundred.

She had never held a job, owned a car, or bought a house. When asked about her, Robert Rothman, her mentor, said that Belle realized the world was filled with the weak. The weak and unwary provided everything Belle needed to live and would always do so.

Robert Michael Rothman himself was revealed to be a serial killer when three armed men invaded his home on a cold and rainy night.

Rothman had been living on a farm with his wife and mother-in law. He had been a well-known sculptor who kept a workshop out in the barn, where he often worked until the early hours of the morning. When three men entered his home one night, they found only the women.

Soon after, the would-be thieves dragged his wife and mother-in-law along to the barn, and that's when his mother-in-law unwisely decided to try to escape. When she was shot down by one of the thugs, Rothman went into action, killing all three men in less than ten seconds.

His wife Claire was reeling in shock from the carnage when Rothman told her that he was leaving. When he asked her to go with him, she stared over at the open trapdoor, and with tears in her eyes, asked him what he had done.

Rothman refused to answer but told his wife that he would come back for her.

Claire, still stunned, simply watched him disappear into the night, but then she decided to investigate the open trapdoor set into the barn's floorboards.

Claire had known about the trapdoor since she was a child because the farm she owned had once been her grandparents' property. Her grandfather had been a moonshiner on the side during Prohibition. He had used the underground chamber as a vault to store his illegal

liquor. After the Volstead Act was repealed and alcohol was legal once more, her grandfather had sealed off his hidden vault.

What Claire discovered that night is that her husband had been putting the chamber to illegal use once more, but illegal use of a far more heinous nature. Claire Rothman came upon the body of a girl hanging from chains, the evidence of torture plain to see.

Behind the suspended body were dozens of 55-gallon polyurethane drums. They were all black and sealed up tight, and each one contained the body of a young woman.

When Claire was later questioned by the FBI, she told them that Rothman had abducted her as a girl, but later released her after realizing that he loved her.

Convinced that he had changed, Claire married him. Four decades later, she learned the truth, that Rothman had never changed, and that his sick impulses had never left him, had in fact, only grown stronger. The man she loved was a monster.

That's when Victoria Belle entered the picture, Belle who was theorized to have been Rothman's first victim, but instead was revealed to be his student.

Victoria Belle was sicker and more sadistic than Rothman, and she came forward to help him. When Rothman refused to leave and disappear without his wife, Victoria Belle helped him storm an FBI safe house. It ended in a deadly, yet vain, attempt to grab Claire and whisk her away.

In the aftermath, Rothman was captured, and Belle was thought to have possibly drowned after diving into the rushing water of a rock-strewn stream.

However, a recent photo found on a dead man's phone was later confirmed to be Belle, and her last known location was Indiana, but that was months ago.

I saw why Lawson considered her a challenge. Up until the time she came forth to help Rothman, Victoria Belle was a ghost. That act of charity toward her mentor was responsible for both her fingerprints and her DNA to be on file. They were later matched to dozens of crime scenes.

However, other than Rothman, Victoria Belle had no friends or family that she cared about, and Rothman was deep inside a high-security prison. In a way, it was too bad, because her affection for him appeared to be her only weak spot.

I rose from my seat and began pacing as I thought about Robert Rothman. I remembered seeing pictures of the man when his evil nature came to light, and it was discovered that he had killed dozens of young women. Most of those women were similar to Victoria Belle, at least in appearance and age.

It had been assumed that Rothman and Belle were lovers, but were they? Would a woman risk herself to help a man she loved free his wife from federal agents? It seemed to me that Rothman and Belle were likely more like father and daughter, and a loving daughter would risk herself to help her father.

I ended my pacing and retook my seat to send off an email to Lawson. I requested that he send me everything he had on Robert Rothman.

Rothman was the key to finding Belle, I was certain of it, if for no other reason than that he knew her better than anyone.

I looked at a photo of Belle and realized that we shared a superficial resemblance, although her eyes were blue instead of green, and her raven hair was curly rather than straight, but we appeared to be of the same body type and height.

I put the files away and hoped that my subconscious would come up with a plan of attack. In any event, Victoria Belle was a future concern. I intended to enjoy myself fully until it was time to go off and track her down.

~

RAMÓN and I arrived in Santuario two days later, and Walter Calvin, Ramón's adopted father, greeted me with a warm embrace. Walter Calvin was sixty-three, lanky, with a receding hairline and crinkly blue eyes.

He smiled at me. "Now I have a son *and* a daughter to visit me, how are you, Blue?"

"I'm great, Walter, or should I call you Dad?"

"Walter will be fine, but I hope you'll think of me as a father-in-law; I certainly consider Ramón my son."

"I do think of you as my father-in-law, you're family."

Ramón and I went out for lunch and entered the town's only restaurant. Ramón's friend, Juan, and Juan's wife, Marta, owned the eatery. Marta and Juan were in the process of moving to the Fort Worth area and I looked forward to seeing them more often.

Juan, Like Ramón, had been a gang member as a boy, and like Ramón, he had his life turned around by Walter, who was a former priest.

Juan was a good-looking man who was built thick and was shorter than Ramón, while Marta was beautiful with long flowing hair and big brown eyes.

Marta and Juan had a nine-year-old daughter named Mary. When I told her about our horses, her eyes lit up in wonder.

"You mean you can go riding anytime you want?"

“That’s right, and when you move there, we’ll take you riding if your parents think it’s okay.”

Mary looked at her mother with pleading eyes.

“Can I, Mom?”

“Not by yourself, but you can ride along on the horse with Blue or Ramón, would you like that?”

“Yes.”

“Good, now go in the kitchen and see if Sylvia needs a hand.”

Mary went skipping off and Marta sighed.

“I’m so glad you mentioned the horses. She’s not looking forward to moving.”

“I can understand that; all her friends are here.”

Ramón touched me on the arm to get my attention.

“Mary and Amy are the same age; perhaps they’ll be in the same school district?”

I nodded. “Yes, I think they will be.”

Juan looked back and forth at us.

“Who’s Amy?”

“The daughter of a friend of ours,” Ramón said, “and I think they’ll get along great.”

~

WE VISITED several other townspeople that day. When we returned to the house, we found Walter in the kitchen preparing to cook dinner.

Ramón made a groaning noise as he pointed at Walter.

“Why are you cooking? You know you’re not good at it.”

Walter stuck his tongue out at him.

“My housekeeper, Anna, her bursitis has gotten worse and so she’s retired and moved in with her daughter. Until I find a new housekeeper, I’m the maid and the cook.”

I walked over and saw a griddle in Walter’s hand while also noticing that he had a stack of chicken legs and breasts piled in a bowl.

“What are you going to make, Walter?”

“Fried chicken.”

“With a griddle pan?”

“Isn’t that how it’s done?”

Ramón laughed. “How long have you been without Anna?”

“About a week, why?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t starved.”

Walter gave us a sheepish look.

“I’ve been eating out all week.”

I took the griddle from his hand and kissed him on the cheek.

“Go spend time with Ramón while I cook dinner. I’m no chef, but I do know how to fry chicken.”

Walter smiled. “Thank you, Daughter.”

The next day, Ramón and I traveled to a nearby town that was much larger than Santuario, and we shopped at their supermarket.

By the time we left for home, Walter had a freezer full of gourmet TV dinners and I had cooked several meals that he could heat up in the following days, but Ramón made Walter promise to find a new housekeeper.

~

WHEN WE RETURNED to Fort Worth, Ramón and I began a new ritual. We went riding every morning. I hadn’t been riding so much since I was a kid and I loved it.

Two weeks after I captured William Stinett, I found that my thoughts were more and more turning to Victoria Belle. The woman was truly dangerous and would continue killing for as long as she remained on the loose. That said, I still had no starting point or plan to use in capturing her. Until I did, it was useless to even begin searching.

Rothman was the key, he knew Belle better than anyone and might possibly know where she would hide. At the very least he should be able to help guide a search in the right direction.

Rothman and Belle were tight, but she had escaped while he was now locked away, perhaps his misery would like some company.

While sitting in the office, I grabbed the secure phone I used for work and dialed Lawson’s number. When there was no answer, I left a message.

He called back several minutes later.

“I hope this call means that you’ve been thinking about Victoria Belle?”

“It does, and I’ve come to the conclusion that Robert Rothman is the key to finding her.”

“I don’t see how, Rothman is locked away and he’s never agreed to offer assistance in her capture.”

“Still, no one knows her as well as he does.”

“What would you like to do?”

“I want to interview him. Can that be arranged?”

“I believe so, but I’ll have to make requests and it will have to take place in the prison.”

“I understand. Let me know when you have a date and time.”

“There’s no rush on capturing Victoria Belle, you know, and what I mean by that, is that I don’t expect you to do this all on your own.

You have a team behind you now. That team will gather intel as it becomes available. When Belle slips up and reveals a possible location, that's when I'll send you in."

I let out a long breath.

"Lawson, that could take months. I'd rather be more proactive where she's concerned."

"All right, I hired you because you know what you're doing, so I guess I'll let you do it, but be aware, I'll be sending you after other targets until you're ready to move on Belle."

"You have an assignment for me?"

"Not as yet, and self-starter that you are, you've already gone to work on the Belle case."

"I'm just gathering information for now; the next step in that is to talk to Rothman."

"Blue."

"Yes?"

"Be careful around Rothman. He's in his sixties, of average stature, and will likely be shackled, and he'll still be more dangerous than most men."

"I understand, I've studied the reports you sent me, however, he did meet his match in our mutual friend, didn't he?"

"Yes, but Dr. White's husband may be the deadliest man alive, and that comes from someone who has known many deadly men over the years."

"He may be deadly, but he's nothing like Rothman."

Lawson was silent then, and in that silence, I sensed disagreement with my last statement. He spoke again before I could ask about it.

"I'll let you know when you can see Rothman."

"Thank you, and goodbye."

As I put the phone away, Ramón stuck his head in the door.

"Are you working?"

"More like prep work, and I'll have to travel to Indiana in a day or two."

"What's in Indiana?"

"The United States Penitentiary at Terre Haute, I'm going there to interview Robert Michael Rothman about Victoria Belle."

Ramón made a face. "That bastard, he's killed dozens of girls."

"And played mentor to only one, Victoria Belle."

"Do you really think you'll get him to talk?"

I smiled. "There's only one way to find out."

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THREE DAYS LATER, I entered an interview room inside the penitentiary at Terre Haute, Indiana. Rothman was shackled to a metal chair and dressed in a beige two-piece outfit that resembled hospital scrubs.

We were alone in the room, but a guard stood outside and could see into the room through a small, wire-mesh window placed high up in the door.

The United States Penitentiary at Terre Haute is a high-security prison that houses federal prisoners. It is a sprawling complex, and Rothman was a guest of its death row. Although, given the legal system's innate slowness at dispensing justice, Rothman would likely die of old age before his appeals ran out.

Robert Michael Rothman was sixty-two, five-foot-eight, and weighed one-hundred and fifty-two pounds. Until his true nature was revealed, he had made his living as a sculptor, and a very talented sculptor he was. When researching him, I studied his body of work and often marveled at the beauty he created by chipping away at lifeless stone. Many of his sculptures had an almost animated appearance to them, despite being made of granite or marble. In his other life, he'd labored at turning young women, women who were full of life and promise, into inanimate objects.

Were it ever determined that he had a split personality, I would find it difficult to scoff at the diagnosis.

Rothman looked me over with a pair of intense eyes that didn't match the rest of him at all. His eyes never left me and when I sat down across from him at the scarred wooden table, he took his gaze from my body and stared into my eyes.

I got the impression that he expected me to flinch, but I had seen eyes more intense than his. They belonged to the man that Lawson often referred to as, "Our mutual friend."

Rothman spoke first. "My lawyer thinks this interview is a bad idea, but when I heard you were a young woman, I overrode his objections."

"Does that mean you'll be cooperative?"

"I'm told you want to know about Victoria, why is that?"

"Because I'm going to hunt her down and see that she's locked

away in a cell like you are."

He smiled. "If you fail at that, she will kill you."

"I won't fail."

His smile widened. "Blue Steele, is that your real name?"

"It is."

"Such a hard name for such a soft-looking woman, but I see the fire in those eyes, and I can tell that you're far from soft inside. However, you have a weakness that can be exploited, while Victoria has no weaknesses."

"What weakness do you think I possess?"

"The usual, you have people you care for, I see a ring on your finger there, Victoria could use your husband to hurt you."

"She might find my husband a handful as well."

The smile left his face, but then he gave a slight shrug.

"She'd find someone to use against you, your mother, perhaps even a child."

I thought of little Blue and my heart raced just from imagining Belle getting anywhere near him.

"I will find her and make sure she's locked away. Then, she'll never hurt anyone again."

"And you came here thinking that I would help you with that?"

"I thought it might gnaw at you that she's out there free while you rot away in here."

The smile returned. "I wish Victoria all the best; and I actually live vicariously through her by imagining the fun she's having."

"I wouldn't call murdering innocent people fun."

"Killing the innocent is as natural to Victoria as it is to God, and I suspect, just as pleasing."

"Why are you so certain that Belle would come out on top if I found her?"

"Victoria is a predator; I doubt she'd work up a sweat besting you."

"If that's true, then tell me how to find her?"

The smile widened again. "Perhaps she'll find you first."

I saw that I was getting nowhere and decided to end it by standing up.

"When I catch her, and I will, is there anything you'd like me to tell her?"

"Such confidence you have, but overconfidence is a form of weakness too."

I walked to the door, but then I looked back at him.

"You were wrong when you said that Belle has no weaknesses."

"Oh really, and just what might her weakness be?"

"It's you, old man, Victoria Belle has a soft spot where you're concerned. I plan to exploit it."

The smile left Rothman's face as his gaze fell to the table.

≈

DESPITE MY BRAVADO, I had no idea how to use Belle's affection for Rothman as a weapon against her, because the man was stuck in prison without possibility of parole.

The only good thing about going to see him is that it was a same-day trip, and I was back home by nightfall. Ramón met me at the door, and I joined him on the sofa in front of the television.

I saw specks of green and red on his cheek and knew he must have been painting earlier. I made a mental note to go up to the attic and see what he was working on. I had never been a huge art fan, but I loved Ramón's paintings. I always marveled at his talent.

We muted the sound and I told him about my interview with Rothman.

"It sounds like he was trying to scare you," Ramón said.

"In a way, he did; he made me realize that we should be more prepared for an armed intruder."

"We can both handle ourselves well, and there's a loaded shotgun in the hall closet."

"I know, but just be wary of strangers, especially females, for all I know, Victoria Belle has changed her looks."

"She can't possibly know that you're after her, can she?"

"No, only Rothman can tell her that, and all of his communications are monitored, not that he has any; I understand he's never had a visitor until I showed up."

"His wife never visits? I remember that she was quoted as saying she still loved him even though she found what he did unforgivable."

I sat up straight on the sofa.

"I'd forgotten about her. Her name was Claire Rothman, and other than her husband, she also spent time with Belle, although granted it was twenty years ago. I wonder if she knows anything that might help me find her."

"Are you going to interview her too?"

"That could be difficult."

"Why?"

≈

"IT WOULD BE EASIER for me to get you an interview with the President," Lawson said.

"Are the people in Witness Protection really that isolated? It's not like I'm someone off the street; I'm a fellow law enforcement agent."

“The program is managed by The United States Marshal Service and they take their jobs very seriously. It’s why they’ve never lost anyone who’s entered the program.”

I sighed. “Claire Rothman could be a dead end, or she could be the key to finding Belle, but I won’t know which one she is unless I speak with her.”

“Does it have to be in person?”

“If at all possible, there’s no substitute for it in an interrogation.”

“You want to interrogate her?”

“I meant interview, the woman is innocent of any crimes, correct?”

“Yes, she was gullible and trusting, but she never hurt anyone.”

“Can you put in the request?”

“Most certainly, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“But even if they agree, it will take time, right?”

“You can count on that.”

“That’s okay, because Ramón and I will be at my mama’s for a couple of days.”

“Enjoy the time with your family.”

Lawson’s mention of family made me realize how little I knew about him.

“Do you have family, Thomas?”

“Parents, a sibling,”

“No one special in your life?”

“I’d rather not say.”

I frowned at his guardedness.

“Always the super spy, but you’re welcome here for dinner anytime, okay?”

“Thank you, Blue, that offer is very kind.”

“I like you, boss.”

“It’s mutual, and I’ll put in your request.”

“Thank you.”

He was quiet for a moment, but then he spoke.

“Her name is Robyn.”

“Excuse me?”

“The someone special in my life; her name is Robyn.”

“I hope to meet her someday, and have a pleasant night.”

“And you do the same, Blue.”

I turned off the phone and smiled.

“Well, what do you know, he is human.”

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I LIFTED Blue Parker up from his crib and he gave me a toothless grin. He had blond hair like his father, Chad, but he had inherited green eyes from my daddy, just as I had.

"Oh, Jenny, he gets cuter every time I see him."

My sister grinned. "Doesn't he though,"

Mama came over and took him from me.

"This child is going to be so spoiled, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

Later on, as we sat around the dinner table, I told them about our horses and the new stable.

Mama looked over at Ramón.

"It sounds like you've got more than two coins to rub together, but what exactly is it you do for a living? I thought you were just a town clerk."

I stopped my fork halfway to my mouth and looked over at Ramón. We had never told my family about Santuario, about the town's true function, however, they had met Walter when we married and knew that he lived there.

Ramón nodded at me. "You tell them, Blue, tell them everything."

And so, I did. When I was done, Mama looked astonished and smiled at Ramón.

"You've helped a lot a folks, haven't you?"

"I've tried to, but Walter deserves most of the credit. He's the one that keeps the town running."

"I still don't see how you make a living doing that?" Mama said.

"To join the town, you must pay a percentage of your wealth, no exceptions."

Chad nodded in understanding. "I see, and so the program is self-supporting."

"Exactly." Ramón said.

"But what if they lie about how much they have?" Jenny asked.

"I know everything about the people we accept into the town, most are poor, like the last family I accepted, their percentage translated to only thirty dollars in our currency, but like everyone else, they'll be taken care of until they become assimilated. Fortunately, the father is a skilled carpenter."

Mama made a face. “Thirty dollars?”

“For the first few years, the town was a town in name only and we teetered on bankruptcy, but then we had a new resident arrive. His percentage was over two million, since that time we’ve had a few like that, and that percentage is split 90/10 between the town and me. When the thirty dollars was paid, I received three dollars of it. The ten percent I earn pays my living expenses and enables me to travel and escort new residents to the town. These residents come from different parts of the world, but they’re all fleeing dangerous and oppressive situations. But please keep in mind that this is technically illegal, because many of our residents are undocumented.”

Chad nodded in understanding.

“So, it really is a lot like a witness protection program?”

“Yes, and some of our residents would be killed if their whereabouts were known, but in Santuario they can rest easy and keep their families safe.”

Jenny laughed. “So, you really started your own town?”

“Yes, but again, it was mostly Walter who did the work, still is.”

“What is he, like the mayor?” Chad asked.

“Yes, Walter is the mayor and I’m technically the town clerk, and the sheriff too, although I’m rarely there.”

Mama grinned. “Blue, you married a lawman; that would have made your daddy happy.”

Chad placed a hand on Ramón’s shoulder.

“You’re taking a chance telling us about this, aren’t you?”

Ramón smiled as he looked around the table. “I trust my family.”

“We won’t say a word, will we Mama?” Jenny said.

Mama looked glum.

“What’s wrong, Mama?” I said.

“I want to brag on Ramón, but I can’t, because it’s a secret.”

“You can in Santuario; everyone there treats him like a rock star.”

Mama’s face brightened. “Well, all right then.”

~

THE DAY after we returned home, I got the news. The Witness Security Program or WITSEC, turned down my request to interview Claire Rothman, no reason given.

“Sorry, Blue, but I did tell you to expect this outcome.”

“I know, Lawson, and it was a long shot that she could help anyway.”

“Victoria Belle is on the backburner until she resurfaces, but I do have a new assignment for you.”

“What is it?”

“A group in an Ohio town calling itself the Aryan Brigands, one of their members tried to blow-up a black church. Fortunately, the bomb was discovered before it went off. A thumb print was found on tape used to make the device and matched a man named Lewis Crane. Crane is a founding member of the Aryan Brigands.”

“Thank God the bomb didn’t go off. I assume you want me to go there and track down Lewis Crane?”

“Actually, no, this one is being handled by the FBI, however, I would like you to go there and lend assistance by offering advice.”

“Why would the FBI take advice from me?”

“Because you’re being touted as a specialist, which you most certainly are, and the situation needs finesse more than a show of force.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Thanks to an informant we know that Lewis Crane is still in the area, but he’s in hiding and being sheltered by friends sympathetic to his cause. The African-American community is anxious and looking for results. There have already been several clashes between church members and the Aryan Brigand’s known sympathizers. If Crane isn’t captured soon, tensions will only keep rising.”

“I see, and I assume you want me to leave now?”

“Yes, there’s a jet waiting for you in Dallas along with a package detailing all the background information you’ll need.”

“Who’s my contact?”

“FBI Special Agent Carole Rhodes.”

“All right, I’ll get going.”

“I know this isn’t standard operating procedure for you, but I think you’ll be valuable there in an advisory position.”

“I hope so, but I’ll have a better idea once I look over the material.”

“Good luck, Blue, and watch yourself there, that area is a powder keg waiting to blow.”

I explained the situation to Ramón and headed for the airport.

Once on the jet, I studied the file on Lewis Crane. An odd fact about his habits popped out at me, a fact that just might lead to his capture.

It also made me hungry.

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FBI Special Agent Carole Rhodes looked at me as if I were crazy.

"Every McDonalds in the state? Are you serious?"

"Not everyone in the state, just in the area, and no, I'm not crazy, but I will admit to being unorthodox."

Agent Carole Rhodes was a forty-year-old black woman with short straight hair and luminous brown eyes. We had been getting along until I told her my plan to capture Lewis Crane. We were actually standing in a McDonalds parking lot as we discussed it.

I had read the file on Crane during my flight to the area, and two separate sources stated that Lewis Crane was a McDonalds fast food addict. They said it was almost without exception all he ate every day. If that were true, then someone would be sent out to get it for him. That someone would be making two or three trips a day to do it. Identify that someone, follow them back from where they came from, and they should lead you right to Lewis Crane.

Agent Rhodes took a deep breath to calm herself before speaking.

"All right, every McDonalds in the area, what's that, like a dozen?"

"Close, it's fourteen, fourteen restaurants, watched by two of us each, and every Caucasian customer gets photographed. The photos are fed into the computer and the facial recognition software flags anyone who shows up more than three times, that person is then followed and will hopefully lead us back to Lewis Crane's location."

Rhodes stared at me and I could see the wheels turning behind her eyes.

"I have to admit, it's not a bad idea, but why two of us at each location?"

"To relieve each other."

She shook her head. "It's too many, one each, and a floater to relieve all of them. We'll also piggyback onto the company's security cameras instead of using our own. That way, if they have to leave and follow someone, we won't miss anything."

I smiled. "Good thinking."

She took out her phone.

"Let me pass this idea up the food chain."

I said, "All right," and walked a few steps away to give her privacy.

She came over to me four minutes later.

"They say to do it; apparently you have a good reputation at capturing fugitives."

"You don't like the plan?"

"It's weird, but it makes sense, and hell, I don't have a better Idea."

"What's next?"

Rhodes smiled. "I say we go inside and eat while we work out the details."

~

THE PLAN WAS IMPLEMENTED the next morning. By that evening we had a possibility, as a white man in a Chevy pickup made his third trip through the drive-thru.

The agent stationed there called in.

"He's a white male, mid-thirties, with a lot of tats on his arms and has long hair."

"Are any of the tattoos swastikas?" Rhodes asked.

"Not that I can see, but I'm not that close. I'll report back when he reaches his destination."

Agent Rhodes looked at me and cocked her head.

"It sounds like a possibility."

"Maybe," I said.

We were seated in the tiny offices of the local FBI headquarters that was located in the second-floor office space of a strip mall. The shop beneath us was a tanning salon.

The agent called back ten minutes later.

"This one was a false alarm."

"Why?" Rhodes said.

"When he parked in front of a house, his girlfriend came out and kissed him. She was a young black woman."

"I see, but good work, Ken, and go take a dinner break yourself."

"Anything but hamburgers," Ken said over the speakerphone.

~

TWO MORE PROMISING possibilities appeared the next day, as two men showed at different drive-thrus for a third time. Then, one showed up for a fourth, and then a fifth time.

"Five times in two days," I said, "That sounds like it could be for Lewis Crane."

Rhodes shrugged. "Yeah, but there is that sign on the front lawn."

The man was followed to a home in a predominately white neighborhood, but the house he entered had a WILLIAMS FOR

SHERIFF sign staked into the front lawn. Tyrone Williams was a black candidate. His smiling face was prominent on the sign, not what you would expect to find at a house sympathetic to a white supremacist.

By the following day, the man had made his eighth trip through the drive-thru and Agent Rhodes had to make a decision whether or not to raid the home.

"I really don't like that sign in the yard," she said, "But damn, eight trips in three days is exactly what we were looking for."

She was talking out loud to herself and I let her. It was her decision and if something went wrong during the raid, she would get the blame.

She nibbled at her bottom lip, and then her eyes found mine.

"We do it."

An hour later, Lewis Crane was in handcuffs along with three others, while bomb-making materials were discovered in the home's basement.

As they were dragging him off, Crane shouted at Rhodes.

"Didn't you see the damn sign on the lawn? That should have kept you away."

"We had a criminal informant," Rhodes said.

"Who?"

"The Hamburglar."

~

I GOT BACK HOME LATE that night and found Ramón already asleep. He stirred when I entered the bedroom. I kissed him and told him that I would join him after a shower. When I finally climbed into bed, he hugged me from behind.

"How did everything go in Ohio?"

"Great, we made the arrest and no one got hurt."

He mumbled something unintelligible then and went back to sleep. I was right on the edge of following him into dreamland when I heard my phone vibrate. I reached over to the nightstand, picked it up, and saw that I had a text from Lawson.

CLAIRE ROTHMAN LEARNED OF YOUR REQUEST AND WANTS TO MEET. CALL ME IN THE MORNING FOR DETAILS, AND THAT WAS EXCELLENT WORK IN OHIO.

I PUT down the phone and snuggled closer to Ramón, as I drifted off to sleep while smiling.

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DEPUTY UNITED STATES MARSHAL WALTER VASICEK looked at me as if I had just kicked his puppy.

The two Marshals along with him seemed none too happy either, although the youngest of the three kept giving me admiring glances. I did not mind that; the man was a hunk.

Marshal Vasicek laid down the ground rules as I stood in the empty parking lot of a drive-in theater in Vineland, New Jersey. It was a real, working drive-in theater, and I had thought the one that Ramón and I went to in Ennis Texas was the last one left.

The three men arrived in two unmarked SUV's with windows tinted so dark that I couldn't see inside them. I assumed that Claire Rothman was sitting in one of them and waiting to talk to me, but first, I had to get past Deputy United States Marshal Walter Vasicek.

Vasicek counted off on his stubby fingers.

"1) You will not ask the Program Participant her current name, 2) You will not ask the Program Participant where her current residence is, 3) You will not give the Program Participant your name, 4) If the Program Participant decides to end the interview early, it ends, period. And 5) An electronic recording device is monitoring the conversation between you and the Program Participant. If you break any of the first four rules, I will make sure you are reprimanded fully. Do you understand me, lady?"

"I do Deputy Marshal, clearly, but may I ask you a question?"

"If you must."

"Exactly what is it that I've done to offend you?"

Vasicek looked annoyed by the question but said nothing.

"You're really being a dick to Special Agent Steele, Walt."

Those words came from the good-looking agent, the blond one. I sent him a smile of thanks and he winked back at me.

I sighed inside, being in a committed relationship is great, but there is a downside.

Vasicek visibly relaxed then and sent me a sheepish smile.

"I apologize for my rudeness and short temper, Special Agent, I… I recently suffered the loss of a close friend."

I gave him a sympathetic touch on his arm.

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

“We all miss Charlie, Walt,” the third Marshal said. He was an older man with graying hair.

Vasicek took a deep breath.

“Anyway, Claire Rothman is in the rear of that second SUV. You have thirty minutes; I hope she helps your case.”

“Thank you.”

~

CLAIRE ROTHMAN WAS SIXTY-ONE, with shoulder-length brown hair and blue eyes. Her face was pleasant-looking but displayed a quality of sadness.

We were in the SUV alone, and in the backseat. I turned toward her as fully as I could and gave her a smile.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“You’re welcome… miss? Wait, they told me not to ask you your name.”

“I understand, and I really only have a few questions.”

“About Victoria Belle?”

“Yes, and anything you can tell me about her would be helpful.”

“I can tell you that she and my husband… ex-husband, they share a connection. I once thought it was sexual, but it goes deeper than that. In fact, I would be surprised if they ever slept together.”

“She dropped out of sight for nearly twenty years, but we know from DNA matches at various crime scenes that she’s traveled around. Would you know of anywhere she might have a preference for?”

“No, but I saw her rarely and it was as you say, twenty years ago.”

“Was there some place she always wanted to visit? Do you know if she preferred a certain climate?”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

I looked at her curiously.

“Why did you agree to meet with me?”

“Because I didn’t see the harm, and it’s so nice to talk to someone new, and someone who knows my name. I committed no crimes, miss, except the crime of letting love blind me to what Robert really was. I’m in the witness protection program for my safety, and they nearly denied me.”

“Who are you afraid of, Victoria Belle?”

She looked surprised by the question.

“No, I’m afraid of Robert, if he ever gets free he’ll come for me, not to harm me, mind you, but so that we could be together again. But I’m no longer blinded by love and I could never be near him again without thinking of all those poor girls he’s killed.”

“Your ex-husband is locked away in a high-security prison. I’ve

been there, and I assure you, he is not getting out."

"Are you absolutely certain?"

"Yes ma'am."

Claire smiled at me. "That's a Texas accent, isn't it?"

"It sure is."

"I was born there, but we moved to Indiana when I was little." She sighed. "I miss my farm in Indiana, and the place they put me, well, I'm not supposed to talk about it, but I'll just tell you that it's as far from farm life as you can get, and oh how I miss the open spaces."

"I'm sorry the way things turned out for you."

She gave me a sharp look.

"Don't pity me. It's my own stupidity that's led to this. I never should have trusted Robert once I knew what he was."

I filled the rest of our time by approaching her from different angles about Belle, but she was unable to think of anything that could help me. However, she did reinforce my view that Rothman was the only thing that mattered to Belle other than herself.

As I was getting out of the vehicle, Claire called to me.

"You're a very nice young woman, but please be careful, Victoria Belle is ruthless."

I assured her that I would take precautions and told her goodbye.

As the other Marshals climbed into their vehicles, the handsome one gave me his card.

"Call me sometime; maybe we'll get together for drinks or dinner someday."

I showed him my ring.

"Sorry, but I already have a dinner companion."

He removed his left hand from his pocket and showed me his own wedding band.

"What they don't know won't hurt them."

I said, "Goodbye Marshal," and walked back to my rental.

Apparently, Claire Rothman wasn't the only woman who hadn't married well.

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LAWSON CALLED me at the airport as I was about to board my plane home.

Victoria Belle had surfaced, and in an unexpected and spectacular way. She had attacked the elderly night watchman of a supply house that specialized in heavy construction materials. She'd confronted the watchman as he showed up for work, then gained access to the company's supplies and equipment.

After forcing the man at gunpoint to load up a truck with over a ton of material, Belle shot him dead and drove off in the vehicle.

Exterior security cameras captured her arrival and departure; however, the cameras were linked solely to a video system kept on site. No one was alerted about the robbery until warehouse workers arrived the following morning.

This took place in the Washington DC area and so that was my next stop.

As I picked up the new ticket that Lawson had arranged for me, I gave Ramón a call to tell him that I wouldn't be returning home that day after all.

"I understand," he said with a sigh, "but you be very careful there; that woman is dangerous."

"It's even worse than you think," I said. "The truck she stole was loaded with over a ton of construction-grade explosives."

"What? Why? Is she graduating to terrorist?"

"That is the question that everyone is asking, why?"

~

MY HOTEL WAS near the Capitol Building. After I checked-in, I gave Lawson a call.

"I'm here, is there any news?"

"Not as yet, and I mostly want you there in case she surfaces, in the meantime you can relax. Since the robbery, she now has the ATF on her tail as well. Those explosives have everyone nervous."

"I believe it, any idea what she could have planned?"

"No, but it can't be good, and did you learn anything from Claire Rothman?"

"Just that she's miserable in her new life, but she was unable to help."

"Well, you knew it was a long shot."

"Yes."

"How were you treated by the Marshal's, any problems?"

"A rough start, but when I asked the reason for it I was told it was nothing personal; apparently they just lost one of their own, and he was a close friend."

"Ah, yes, I heard about that, but I didn't know it happened in the northeast."

"What happened?"

"A Marshal killed his live-in girlfriend and then shot himself. They say the woman was beaten to death while covered in a plastic painter's tarp."

"Oh my God, that's horrible, but why the tarp?"

"Probably to avoid blood spatter, if so, that made it premeditated, but I guess after the deed was done he couldn't live with himself."

"When did this happen?"

"Just a few days ago."

"That's tragic, but getting back to Belle, what's my play here?"

"Just standby for now."

"That's it?"

"Yes, but get together with FBI Special Agent Rob Truent at the FBI headquarters tomorrow morning at nine. You'll be expected. I also want you to think things over tonight, try to figure out why Belle wanted the explosives."

"I can think of one reason, but it's an insane idea."

"What is it?"

"Maybe she's planning on breaking Rothman out of prison."

Lawson said nothing for a moment and then I heard him release a long, slow breath.

"That is insane, but so is she. I can't imagine that it's possible, even with explosives, but I'll ask the experts and get back to you."

~

LATER THAT DAY, I was standing at the window in my hotel room, after having pushed the room service cart into the hall. Lawson called back.

"She's surfaced, Blue, and this time there's a living witness. Get over to George Washington University Hospital and join up with Special Agent Truent. He'll be in the trauma unit and he'll fill you in on the details. It looks like you might be right and that she's planning on breaking Rothman out of prison."

"I'm on it."

~

I HAD RENTED a car at the airport, and after fiddling with the GPS, I was on my way to the hospital. Lawson sent me a text as I was stopped at a traffic light.

OFFICER DOWN AT DUPONT CIRCLE AND THE PERP STOLE HIS SQUAD CAR, PERP THOUGHT TO BE VICTORIA BELLE. MEET AGENT TRUENT ON SCENE.

I READ THE TEXT TWICE. *Could it be Belle, and why was she stealing a DC patrol car?*

I reached the hospital and my GPS took me past it and to one of the largest traffic circles I'd ever seen. It made me think of the one in Waco, Texas, although there was a whole lot more to see at this one.

It was nighttime, and so it was dark, but I knew that my destination would be awash in red and blue emergency lights. As I drove past a huge bookstore I saw the strobe of lights. After turning onto Connecticut Ave, I drove past the Starbucks where all the action was and parked down the street behind a police car with its lights off.

Apparently, the officer who had been shot had been taken away because there was no sign of an ambulance. There was a crowd of police and feds gathered in front of the Starbucks, and so I walked back toward them. I was wearing jeans and a leather jacket. When I zipped open the jacket, my badge was plain to see on my hip, in front of my holster, and so I was allowed through.

The first thing I saw was the blood, and there was a lot of it. I turned to one of the cops gathered, a police detective in a three-piece-suit, and asked about the officer's condition.

"They say he'll live, but he was shot twice. A bullet in the leg, and the other one snuck past his vest."

"Thank God he'll make it, and do you know where I can find Special Agent Truent?"

The man looked around and then nodded at a group of three by a lamppost, two men and a woman.

"Truent is the tall guy."

I thanked him and introduced myself to Truent and the other FBI agents. Truent was very tall, and about fifty with a pale complexion and short, graying hair. He had a disinterested air about him that I took as world-weariness.

"They just found the cop car abandoned near the Taft Bridge, but no sign of Belle, if it was Belle," Truent said.

“Exactly what happened here?”

“The cop that was shot is an Officer Damon Stark; Stark heard the call about the first victim and then stops in here for a coffee. Stark’s sergeant says the kid’s brain works like facial recognition software, he never forgets a face.”

“He spotted her?”

“Yeah, as Stark was leaving with his coffee, Victoria Belle walked by. She was in the middle of a group of Australian tourists. Unfortunately, Belle must have noticed his reaction, because she shoots him in the side and the bullet slips past the edge of his vest, nicking a lung. Stark drops his weapon before he can fire, but then he grabs Belle’s left arm and won’t let go. A witness says that Stark damn near tore her arm off before she managed to shoot him again in the leg.”

“It sounds like he injured her.”

“Yeah, and we’re checking emergency rooms and clinics.”

“Who was the first victim?”

Truent’s blank gaze studied me as he answered.

“A Cathy Givens, she’s an employee of DOJ, not an agent or anything, she’s in administration, Belle attacked her at home and made her access the database for archives. Her throat is cut, but she survived.”

I screwed up my face in confusion.

“Why did Belle want to access the Department of Justice database?”

“Get this, she downloaded the blueprints for The United States Penitentiary at Terre Haute.”

“The prison where Robert Rothman is being held.”

Truent sent me the blank look once more, and then said one word.

“Bingo!”

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EARLY THE FOLLOWING MORNING, at FBI Headquarters, Truent held up a clear evidence bag that contained what looked like a credit card, but had the word, METROCARD, printed on it.

After being shot in the side, the cop, Officer Damon Stark, grabbed at Belle. In the struggle, she shot him again, not realizing that Stark had torn the pocket on her jacket. The card in the bag was found lying near him.

"That's used for the subway, right?"

Truent nodded. He sat at a desk that was one of many in a large room. It was early, and so only a handful of agents had arrived.

"It is for the subway, but not here, this is used up in New York City."

"How certain are we that it belongs to Belle?"

"It was covered in smudged prints, but there's a partial match to Victoria Belle, nothing that would hold up in court, but the lab says the 'Whorl Pattern and Bifurcation' indicate that it's her."

"And we're certain it was Belle who shot Officer Stark?"

"Yes, her prints were all over the stolen cop car."

I sighed.

"It's still insane to think that she could break Rothman out, even with a ton of explosives and blueprints of the prison."

"She's an insane kind of lady."

"That she is, so what's next?"

"We keep looking, but now we also have people searching in Indiana and New York City. Also, state troopers from here to Indiana have been alerted to keep an eye out for that stolen truck."

"A needle in a haystack," I said, "And what if she's switched trucks?"

Truent smiled for the first time.

"It's not all bad news. Officer Stark says he's certain that he dislocated her left shoulder when they struggled, in any event, he says she cried out in pain."

"Good for him; I'd like to deliver some pain to her myself."

"Wouldn't we all," Truent said.

~

I SPENT an unproductive week in DC following around Special Agent Rob Truent as we waited for Belle to show herself again. It turned out that Truent had a surprisingly good sense of humor; it kept things from getting boring. When Belle didn't surface, I headed for home, and Rob promised to keep me informed of any new leads.

The days I spent in DC left me with a lot of time to think, and after spending a day at home, I called Lawson and asked him for a favor.

"New York City? Why, because of that transit card?"

"Exactly, it's the one piece that doesn't fit. Maybe New York City is where she goes to get lost in a crowd."

"There are over eight million people there, so it makes sense, but given that, how do you expect to find her in a crowd of that size?"

"Pure luck."

Lawson chuckled. "Well, at least you're honest, but don't you think Indiana is a better bet? The entire state has less population than New York City."

"True, but my gut says New York City, and I'm sure the ATF and FBI are crawling all over Indiana hoping to find that truckload of explosives."

"That's certainly true. All right, if your gut says New York City then that's good enough for me, but please check in once a day."

"You got it, boss, and thanks."

I got off the phone and went out to the patio where Ramón was grilling hamburgers. I had tossed a salad earlier, and we sat out on the patio and ate.

"So you're off again? I'll be glad when you catch that bitch; she keeps you away from home too much."

"It's still better than the eight weeks we were apart while I underwent training at Quantico."

"That's' true," he said.

I smiled. "Would you like to come with me?"

"To New York City?"

"Yes, two pair of eyes are better than one and we can sneak in a little time together, although I warn you, I will be working to find her, and that means long hours."

"When are we leaving?"

"First thing tomorrow, after we eat I'll go online and get a ticket for you."

"How certain are you that Belle is there?"

I put down my fork before answering.

"I'm actually very certain, but I don't know why. It's like my brain knows something that I don't and it's annoying not to have a reason for the feeling, but I feel strongly that she's there."

"What connection does Belle have to New York?"

“None that I know of, but it’s an easy place to get lost in, and maybe that’s the attraction.”

“It could be that she’s there to hire muscle to help break Rothman out of jail?”

“Maybe, but who in their right mind would help her, even for money?”

Ramón took a sip of wine, then spoke.

“It’s a mystery, but the good news is that if she makes an attempt she’ll probably get caught or killed.”

“Yes, but how many will she take with her?”

~

Our flight didn’t leave until ten a.m. and so we snuck in a morning ride at dawn.

I still marveled that I owned my own horse, and I loved riding in the morning. After the ride, we had to hustle to the airport to catch our flight.

Ramón and I were seated apart on the plane, but at least we were in Business Class together. He had a seat beside a stunning blonde who kept chatting him up and I sent him more than one mock look of jealousy. I, on the other hand, was next to a tubby businessman who slept the entire flight.

Ramón and I talked as we walk toward the baggage carousel.

“So, what’s her name?”

“Her name is Delilah McKenzie, she’s twenty-three, born and bred in New Orleans, loves Italian food, and she’s staying at the Hotel Pennsylvania until Tuesday.”

“She volunteered all that?”

“She did, she also said that I look like an ex-boyfriend of hers.”

I smiled sweetly. “If you don’t want to look like an ex-husband of mine, you’ll forget all about her.”

Ramón gave me a confused look.

“Forget all about who?”

I laughed. “Good boy.”

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THAT NIGHT and for the next two days, Ramón and I wandered about New York City hoping to catch sight of Victoria Belle. All the while, the nagging feeling that led me there was growing stronger.

I was going to give it one more day and then end the fruitless searching. Even if Belle were staying in the same hotel with us, the odds were against us ever spotting her.

We had taken a suite on the fortieth floor and the view was spectacular. After eating breakfast, I sat at the room's small table and surfed the web on my laptop, while Ramón carried his coffee over to the window to stare out at the view.

"You know, this view is awesome, and I love the city, but I would miss the open space we have back in Texas."

"Me too," I said absently, as I began reading a favorite blog, but Ramón's words kept echoing in my mind. I looked up at him. "What did you just say, I mean exactly."

"I said the view is awesome, and I love the city, but I would miss the open space we have back in Texas."

"Miss the open space… Claire Rothman said the exact same phrase to me. I wonder if she was relocated here to—oh my God!"

Ramón left the window and came to stand in front of me, looking concerned.

"What's wrong, Blue?"

"Claire Rothman, Victoria Belle is in New York City to abduct Claire Rothman, that's what's been nagging at me."

Ramón looked doubtful. "How could she possibly know that Claire Rothman is here? You don't even know if Claire Rothman is here."

"I know, but think about it. They had me meet with Claire in Vineland, New Jersey, that's fairly close."

"Yes, but Philadelphia is an even closer city to Vineland, or maybe Baltimore, or even Newark."

I looked up at him. "Ramón, I'm right, I can feel it."

He stared at me and then said two words.

"Call Lawson."

~

I DID call Lawson and he said that he would get back to me after making his own calls.

The wait in between seemed like hours but was in fact forty-three minutes. I used those minutes to get dressed and be ready to move.

"Blue, the Marshals are not happy that you're asking about Claire Rothman's whereabouts, and they will neither confirm nor deny that she's there. However, I told them of your concern for her safety. They're sending a team to check on her."

"How long until we hear from them?"

"I have no way to know, but I did request that they keep us informed."

"Thank you, Lawson. I hope I'm wrong, but I have a sick feeling in my stomach."

"I still don't understand why Victoria Belle would want to harm Claire Rothman."

"I don't think she does, but before she can free Robert Rothman she needs his wife, otherwise, Rothman would endanger himself again by seeking Claire out, as he did before. Rothman is in prison now because he risked himself to go back for Claire."

"And you really think she believes she can free Rothman somehow?"

"She does, or needs to believe it, but I don't think it has a thing to do with those explosives she stole or the prison's blueprints. I think that was all a ruse to get us looking the wrong way."

"Hold on, I'm getting another call."

I held, and Lawson was gone for nearly a minute before coming back.

"Blue?"

"Yes?"

"You were right; Claire Rothman is missing, taken."

"And it's Victoria Belle who has her."

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I WAS inside a mobile command unit parked on Houston Street in New York City.

With me were the three Marshals I'd met during my meeting with Claire Rothman, along with two techs to man the unit's equipment.

Marshal Vasicek looked sick to his stomach over Claire's abduction, but there was a bright spot.

When the other two Marshals went to check on Claire, they found her missing, but noticed that the coffeemaker was still on, although the brewing cycle had ended. There was also a cup with a spoonful of sugar in it, and a carton of non-fat dairy creamer sitting on the table.

The coffeemaker had a safety feature that automatically shut it off after two hours, which meant that Claire had been taken that morning. Touching the carton of creamer told them that it was still chilled but held beads of condensation. Apparently, they had missed Victoria Belle by mere minutes.

The good-looking Marshal I now knew was named Vann, and his older partner was Amato.

An alert was put out and the tunnels and bridges were under heavy surveillance. Belle's photo had even been splashed across the giant media screens in Times Square. It was believed that she would have to go to ground or risk being captured.

Marshal Vasicek looked at me and shook his head.

"How the hell did this bitch find Claire Rothman?"

"I have a theory about that, but I'll need your help."

"You got it. If not for you, we still wouldn't know that Claire was missing."

"Who in your organization knows which Marshals are assigned to which program participants?"

"A handful, if that many, and the participants' names are all coded in the computer."

"Who does the coding?"

"That I don't know, but I can find out, give me a minute."

"Also, check for recent deaths among clerical employees."

Vasicek gave me a strange look, but then he took out his phone to make the call. As he did so, I began to wonder why it took Belle so long to abduct Claire. It had been days since she was in DC setting up

her smokescreen, why wait so long?

Vasicek looked even sicker when he got off the phone.

"The person who would have entered the information into the computer was killed in a hit and run accident. Also, a coworker of hers was killed two days prior to that when she surprised a burglar."

"It was Belle. She killed the coworker after learning from her who input the info about the participants, and then she killed the woman who knew the Marshal assignments."

Vasicek shook his head in disagreement.

"Even if that were true, it wouldn't get her to Claire Rothman, the three of us here, we're the only ones who knew where to find her."

I leaned forward and took his hand.

"But there was a fourth who knew, wasn't there?"

He looked down at my hand and then up into my eyes, and I could see the realization dawn.

"You mean… Charlie? My partner?"

I nodded. "I believe so. I think that's why a plastic tarp was used to beat his girlfriend. Belle couldn't risk the blood spatter evidence not matching the scenario she created."

Behind me, I heard Marshal Amato whisper, "Oh Christ," as Marshal Vasicek gripped my hand.

"Belle used your partner's love for his girlfriend to make him tell her where she could find Claire Rothman, but… then she killed her anyway."

Vasicek released my hand to wipe tears from his eyes.

"That makes sense, that makes sense, and it makes a hell of a lot more sense than Charlie going nuts and hurting Barbara like that. He loved Barbara, and he wasn't that type of man. Oh God, damn me for ever believing it."

"It's a theory, but I think a much closer look at the forensics will prove it to be true."

Vasicek stared at me with wet eyes. "Thank you."

~

I CALLED FBI Special Agent Rob Truent in DC to check on his progress.

"Any news, Rob?"

"No, Blue, we still have no idea where those explosives are, but I hear that Belle might be in New York?"

"Yes, and that's where I'm calling from. You ran a thorough check of hospitals and clinics in the DC area to see if Belle had her shoulder treated, right?"

"Yeah, and they came up empty."

"But were there any leads that looked promising?"

“Oh yeah, we checked, we checked as far away as North Carolina and Delaware. We came up with three possibilities, but they all fizzled out.”

“Has anyone done a second check?”

“No, why would we? All three women were confirmed to be who they claimed to be.”

“Would it be possible to do a follow up interview with them?”

“You’re on to something, aren’t you?”

“I think so, but if I’m right, one of those women is dead now.”

“Oh crap. Listen, I’ll get back to you on this.”

~

AS I WAITED to hear from Rob Truent, I checked-in with Lawson.

“I heard about your theory of how Belle found Claire Rothman’s location and it’s absolutely chilling. I’d be willing to bet she had the same type of plan in mind to free Rothman. If she had threatened the family of the warden or a state official, she might have managed to get Rothman transferred to a less secure location, or possibly have his records altered before anyone realized it.”

“Yeah, the more I consider it, the surer I am that the explosives were just a decoy to freak everyone out.”

“They’re still out there somewhere though.”

“I know, but once we find Belle, I think we’ll find those too.”

“Any idea on how to do that, find Belle, I mean?”

“I’m working on that now with Special Agent Truent in DC and—oh wait, he’s calling back, let me give you a call once I’ve spoken to him.”

“Right,” Lawson said.

I heard him disconnect and then took the other call.

“Rob?”

“Your hunch paid off, Blue. We checked on a Miss Alice Dyer from Fairfax, Virginia, she’s missing and hasn’t been seen since we last checked on her over a week ago.”

“Why wasn’t she reported missing by anyone?”

“Miss Dyer lives with her mother, Gail, and is also her caregiver. The mother has cancer, and now both of them are missing.”

“And likely dead, I take it that Alice Dyer resembles Belle?”

“I’m looking at the photo from her driver’s license now, and yeah, if Belle put on glasses and tied back her hair she could pass as Alice Dyer to anyone that didn’t know her.”

“Alice Dyer was treated for a dislocated left shoulder, but it was actually Belle posing as her. My guess is that she came upon Dyer and her mother somewhere and saw that Alice Dyer was a good enough

match."

"Yeah," Truent said. "Then she follows them home, ties them up or locks them away, while she goes out to get her shoulder fixed. When she returns to their home, she threatens to kill the mother if Alice Dyer doesn't lie to the cops."

"But once your people checked the story, she took the women somewhere and killed them."

"Hmm, it's a workable theory we just came up with there, Blue, but do you think Belle is still using her identity?"

I smiled into the phone.

"I certainly hope so, because if she is, we have her."

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LAWSON'S VOICE filled my ear with good news as I spoke to him on the phone.

"In the past few days, Alice Dyer has eaten out several times, shopped at a home improvement store, and most importantly, she's rented six different storage units around New York City."

"That's impressive for a woman who's likely been dead for nearly a week," I said.

"New York swat teams are gearing up to raid those storage units. It wouldn't surprise me if Belle is using one for a temporary hideout."

"I certainly hope so. Claire Rothman must be terrified; she knows that Belle is capable of anything."

"Do you think she'll hurt the woman?"

I thought about that and realized something.

"No, she won't hurt her. As a matter of fact, she wouldn't dare harm her."

"Because of Robert Rothman?"

"Yes."

"Blue, regardless of the outcome, you've done great work today, and you may have given that dead Marshal back his honor. They're going to go over that case again and I'm betting that he'll be exonerated."

"I think he will be once they take a closer look, and I'll be riding along with the Marshals today. If they track Belle down, I'll be there to see it."

"I'll make calls and see that the New York Police know that you're not just an observer. If not for you, Belle would be long gone with Claire Rothman."

"Actually, we can thank the DC cop that dislocated her shoulder. That injury not only sidelined Belle and delayed her timetable, but it led to the clue that guided us to New York City in the first place."

"I have to see to another matter, but keep me informed."

"Will do, boss."

~

BELLE WAS DISCOVERED HIDING in the fifth storage unit they

searched, and she had Claire Rothman with her.

Meanwhile, in the third storage unit on South Street, the ATF came across the stolen explosives and blasting caps, and everyone made a sigh of relief.

The abduction had now turned into a hostage crisis and the officer in charge of the scene was considering storming the open storage unit. It was a 12x8 foot space in which Victoria Belle was huddled against the back wall and clutching onto Claire as a shield.

Belle said that she would kill Claire and then take as many of us with her as she could.

The hostage negotiator had done his best to keep things calm, but It's a bit difficult to negotiate with someone when all they do is promise to kill you.

Marshal Vasicek filled me in on the tactical side of things.

"The snipers can't get a clear shot because of the angle, but they think they have an eighty percent chance of taking her down before she can shoot Claire."

I winced at that. "Eighty percent? I don't like those odds."

"Neither do I. We've never lost a participant in the program and I don't want to start now, and besides, I really like Claire Rothman. I can't say that of many of the people we protect."

~

I CALLED LAWSON, and despite protest from those in charge of the scene, I was being allowed to approach Belle and attempt to end things peacefully.

A short time later, I crept toward the open storage unit while wearing a bulletproof vest.

"Victoria Belle! I'm Special Agent Blue Steele and I'm coming to the doorway to talk to you. Do not fire. I simply want to talk."

"Stay back bitch or Mrs. Rothman dies!"

"Victoria, I have someone with me that you'll want to talk to."

"I don't want to talk to anyone; I just want you assholes to back off!"

"We're moving closer so that you can see us. My weapon is in my holster and my hands are empty."

There was no response, and I moved closer into her range of vision. She held a gun at Claire's temple with her right hand, while her left arm was around Claire's waist. I took note of the shoulder brace Belle wore over her shirt.

I was armed, but my gun was still in the holster on my hip. However, I had one other accessory that I hoped would keep things from turning violent.

When Belle saw the large computer tablet strapped to my chest her eyes went wide with shock, as did the eyes of Claire Rothman.

Both Belle and Claire whispered, “Robert?” as they saw the image of Robert Rothman that was being transmitted from the prison in Terre Haute.

“Talk to her Rothman. Tell Belle to stand down or there’s a chance your ex-wife will be injured, or worse.”

I couldn’t see Rothman of course, but I could hear him. He emitted a gasp when he saw that Belle had a gun pressed against Claire’s head.

“Victoria, please don’t hurt her.”

“I was doing this for you, Robert. Goddamn it, but I can’t stand the thought of you rotting away.”

“Oh, Victoria, you should have forgotten me and moved on, because now they’ll have you too.”

Belle gave a tiny shake of her head, which made me slide my right hand an inch closer to my holster.

Victoria Belle’s pictures didn’t do her justice. She was very beautiful and there was a vitality in her, a fire in the eyes that might be the flames of insanity, but they were bright nonetheless. I kept watch on her and ignored all else, because one way or another, things were about to get intense.

“I can’t go to prison, Robert; I’d rather be dead.”

“I can understand that sentiment, but please, don’t take Claire with you, please don’t harm my wife.”

Belle made a half-smile as she gazed at Rothman’s image.

“You poor lovesick fool.”

“Victoria… I’m begging you.”

Belle’s eyes flicked downward, checking my hands. When she saw that they were still empty, she looked back at Rothman.

“Goodbye, Robert.”

Belle flung Claire aside even as she turned her gun toward me. I drew my weapon and fired twice.

My daddy was the fastest with a gun I ever saw, and my Cousin Jake Caliber is lightning quick as well. While I wouldn’t put myself in their class, I am still faster than most. I was certainly faster than Belle, as both of my shots slammed into her right shoulder and rendered her gun arm useless.

Before Belle slid fully to the concrete floor, members of the swat team were on her and placing her in restraints.

I went to Claire, helped her to stand, and she collapsed against me while crying. When Rothman’s voice came seemingly out of nowhere, it startled both of us. I had forgotten he was still connected.

“Claire, honey, are you all right?”

Claire backed away, gazed at the face of her ex-husband, and

asked me a question.

"How do you turn that thing off?"

I stared at her. "With lethal injection,"

I hadn't meant to be flippant, but to my surprise, Claire began tittering, then giggled, and soon the two of us were laughing aloud. I knew most of it came from the relief we felt now that the crisis had passed. I turned the tablet off and Rothman disappeared in mid-sentence.

"Claire, I still lo—"

When Victoria Belle was yanked from the storage unit and strapped down atop a gurney, I saw that my shots had done serious damage on their way out of her shoulder.

Despite her wounds, Belle struggled against her bonds as she kept shouting the same six words.

"You were supposed to kill me! You were supposed to kill me! You were supposed to kill me!"

The cops loaded her aboard the ambulance and off she went with a police escort.

I turned back to Claire, who was being examined by a paramedic.

"You've nothing to fear now, the two people who could cause you harm will both be locked away."

"That's true, isn't it?"

I nodded yes, as Marshal Vasicek and his two colleagues gathered around Claire with smiling faces.

I excused myself and made a call away from the activity.

"Yes, Blue?"

"Hi Lawson, Victoria Belle is in custody and Claire Rothman is safe."

"Excellent, but I'm afraid there will be no, 'Do the job and disappear,' on this one, you'll be credited with her capture."

"I'll gladly file a report, and I plan to give credit to that DC cop that was wounded. He picked Belle out of a crowd of tourists at night and came close to ending this whole thing early."

"Would you happen to remember his name?"

I thought for a moment and it came back to me.

"Yes, his name is Officer Damon Stark."

"I think I'll keep an eye on him; I'm always in need of talented people."

~

THE REST of that day was spent dealing with the aftermath of the hostage crisis and arrest. Ramón joined me at the FBI field office, so that we could have dinner together after I was done.

As we were leaving, I saw Claire Rothman standing alone in front of the building and looking lost.

"Claire?"

She smiled at us, and when she walked over, she hugged me.

"Your name is Blue, right?"

"Yes, and this is my husband, Ramón, but tell me, why are you alone? Where are the Marshals?"

"I've left the witness protection program. It's voluntary you know, and as you said, I've no one to fear now."

"But where will you live, what will you do?"

The lost look entered her eyes again and she glanced around helplessly.

"I… I just know that I can't stay here, not in this crowded city, and I have until the end of the month to decide where I'll go."

"I read in the reports that you sold your farm before entering the program. Why not use the proceeds from the sale to buy a new one somewhere, or at least a house with some land?"

"Oh, I don't have that money. I donated it to the relief fund created for the children of Robert's victims; some of those girls were single mothers."

"You have no money?"

"None to speak of, but I'm still healthy and I'm not afraid of work."

Ramón put out his hand.

"As Blue said, I'm her husband, Ramón. Mrs. Rothman, would you like to join us for dinner?"

Claire smiled as she shook his hand.

"Yes I would, but my name isn't Rothman, it's Wylie. I'm going back to using my maiden name."

Ramón offered her his arm, and Claire took it.

I leaned over and whispered to him.

"What's going on?"

He smiled. "I have an Idea."

~

THREE WEEKS LATER, we were back in Santuario. Accompanying us was Claire Wylie.

Ramón had told her in general terms about the town over the dinner we shared the night of Belle's capture. Claire later called us and said she would give it a try.

When Walter saw his new housekeeper, his eyes lit up in surprise and he sent Claire a bright smile to match the one she was sending him.

Walter showed her the tiny room that sat off the kitchen. It held a

double bed, a dresser with a TV on top, and a bookcase, however, it did have a window. Claire stood in front of it gazing out at land that stretched to the horizon.

"Look at that view," she murmured, "Not a building in sight."

Walter shrugged apologetically.

"I know it's not much of a room, but the work is easy, and I'm sure we'll get along."

Claire turned and smiled at him.

"I'm sure we will."

While Walter and Ramón went into the living room to discuss town business, I stayed in the kitchen with Claire.

She whispered to me. "You didn't tell me that he was such a handsome man."

"Walter? Yes, he is cute, isn't he?"

"He certainly is."

Ramón and I stayed for three more days until we were sure that Claire and the town of Santuario were a good fit, they were.

Ramón had driven us to town, and so, I was driving us home. As we drove away, I looked over at him.

"I have a feeling that Claire might turn into more than a housekeeper someday; those two seem a good match."

Ramón looked startled by the idea.

"Walter and Claire? Blue, the man is a former priest."

"With the emphasis on *former*."

"Hmm, you know, he did say something about her eyes, about how blue they are."

"Just don't be surprised if it happens."

"Maybe they'll make me a little brother someday."

I let out a loud laugh.

"Can you imagine?"

"I'd rather imagine us doing it, having children I mean."

"Soon?"

"Someday, someday soon, when you're ready of course."

I pulled my truck to the shoulder of the highway and stared at him.

"What?" he said.

I took his hand.

"That day may be sooner than you think, I'm late, not very late, but it's rare for me to be late at all."

"Are you serious?"

I nodded, and he kissed me.

"When will we know for sure?"

"I'll take a test when we get home."

Ramón squeezed my hand.

“Are you ready for that, having a baby?”

“I’m ready for whatever comes, and if it’s true, I’ll be in heaven.”

I pulled back unto the road and headed for home, while wondering if we were two… or three.

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BLUE STEELE – PAST SINS - Book 6 of the Blue Steele Series
Featuring TAKEN! & TANNER

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VENICE BEACH, CALIFORNIA

I WATCHED the woman known as Prophet walk along the famous Venice Beach boardwalk. She was dressed as a gypsy fortune teller. I'd been watching her for a day and a half, and despite the dyed red hair and the fortune teller outfit, I was certain that I'd found the right woman.

Around us were people dressed in all sorts of costumes as they made their living as artists and performers.

My friends, Jessica White and her husband had been targeted by Prophet for death on more than one occasion. Prophet had even been so bold as to threaten their young twins. Prophet had also used one of Mr. White's grown daughters as a naïve pawn and afterward had tried to have her killed.

White's daughter, Viola, recently recalled that Prophet once said she loved the energy of the Venice Beach community and its eclectic mix of tourists, bodybuilders and vendors. After hearing that, I thought that Prophet might think it would be the last place the police would look for her; now it appeared that I was right.

While she sometimes told fortunes, Prophet was really just blending in, and so was I. I was dressed up as a cowgirl. I entertained the passing tourists by doing tricks with a lasso. A family friend had taught me how to work a lasso when I was just a young teen and I was putting that skill to use as a disguise.

Prophet's lips seemed to be stuck in a half smile of pleasure. It likely gave her a great deal of satisfaction to think that she had evaded the authorities. She knew they would expect her to be alone, cowered, and staying out of sight, not out among the public and in plain view.

As she drew closer to where I was, Prophet noticed me looking at her. I sent her a big smile as I tried to appear guileless. I wanted her to see me as a fresh-faced cowgirl.

I figured that I was good looking enough to attract her interest with my long dark hair and big green eyes. Still, I was older than Prophet's usual young lovers; there was always the chance that she would pass me on by.

I was wearing shorts that barely covered my ass cheeks while my blouse was tight and showed a generous amount of cleavage. Despite being pregnant, a baby bump had yet to make an appearance and my midriff was still flat and taut.

Prophet's eyes roamed over my body as she watched me put on a show by twirling the lasso. There were also a pair of realistic-looking six-shooters hanging from my gun belt. The six-shooters should look realistic, since they were the real thing and fully loaded.

Prophet walked by me, then looked back to make sure that I was still watching her. When I sent her a wink to go along with the dazzling smile, Prophet crooked her finger and called me over.

When I reached her, I sent the lasso over her in a playful manner as I spoke to her.

"Hi there, gypsy lady."

"Hello, yourself," Prophet said, but as she spoke, she felt my lasso tighten about her. Before she knew it, her arms were pinned to her sides.

"Hey, loosen this rope; it's too tight."

Her struggling only tightened the lasso. When Prophet saw several men in suits approaching from the front, I saw sweat break out on her forehead. The men had federal agent written all over them. She tried to free her gun from where it was hidden beneath her shawl, but her arms were held fast by my lasso. After the men reached her, the rope went slack and her arms were wrenched behind her and cuffed.

When Prophet looked back, she saw two female agents smiling at her.

I then stepped close to Prophet.

"Viola Poe recalled that you once told her how much you loved Venice Beach. She also remembered you saying that the best way to stay hidden was to hide in plain sight. It might have worked too, If Viola hadn't survived your attacks on her."

I leaned in closer and whispered.

"Tell me something, Prophet, what do you think the future holds for you, hmm?"

Prophet said nothing, but her eyes burned at me with hate.

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I RETURNED HOME FROM CALIFORNIA, and the next morning I was gazing at myself in the bathroom mirror when Ramón came up from behind and hugged me. My right hand was atop my stomach, my very flat stomach.

Ramón kissed me on the cheek.

"It will happen any day now, so don't obsess over it."

"I'm not obsessing, I'm just frustrated. I mean, I'm four months pregnant, I should be showing a little by now."

As I lowered my blouse, Ramón took me by the shoulders and grinned at me.

"We're having a baby."

"Yes, we are, and apparently it will be a very flat baby."

"You'll begin showing any day now. Just remember what the doctor said and enjoy being skinny while you can."

I gave Ramón a peck on the lips and walked back into the bedroom to grab my purse.

"I need to get going. I have to meet that police detective in New Jersey and my jet leaves in an hour."

"This is about that cold case that Lawson asked you to help out with?"

"Yeah, and frozen is more like it. The woman we'll be looking for went missing nearly forty years ago."

"If anyone can find her it's you, Blue."

I sighed. "She's likely long dead. The cop I'm teaming up with is named Detective Olson. She's established the fact that the missing woman was last seen in the company of a drug dealer who was murdered during a deal gone bad. Apparently, the scene was a real bloodbath of a shoot-out between rival gangs, but still, the woman's body was never found."

"If she wasn't found then she must have survived the shoot-out."

"Maybe, there was unidentified blood found at the scene. But this was decades ago, years before DNA testing was available, and there are no samples of the blood left. The new theory is that the woman fled into the surrounding woods and later died from her wounds."

"Wouldn't someone have found her?"

"It's a very dense area of trees and undergrowth. It's possible that

her bones are still out there. Detective Olson told me on the phone that she's pushing for a search of the area with a pair of cadaver dogs."

"How long do you think you'll be gone?"

"Only a few days. No one is expecting any miracles here, but maybe the dogs will find a body and we'll be able to give the family a sense of closure. From what I understand, the missing woman left behind a daughter who is the force behind the reopening of this cold case."

"She must have clout if she can get Lawson in her corner," Ramón said.

"Actually, Robin Dyer, Lawson's girlfriend is the one who asked for help. The missing woman's daughter is an old friend from her college days."

I gathered my travel bag and walked out to my truck with Ramón following, after sharing a long kiss, he placed his hand on my stomach.

"Take care of yourself and our baby, I love you both more than I can say."

I kissed him again, then I was off to the airport, I had no idea that I would soon be hunting down three very dangerous men.

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DETECTIVE CAROL OLSON was in her late thirties, fit, and had a reputation as a top homicide detective. A pretty woman with auburn hair and hazel eyes, Olson stayed trim by entering various 5K runs for good causes. She told me that it gave her a reason to exercise while also helping out local charities.

We were getting along well within moments of meeting. When I told her I was pregnant, she looked down at my stomach and shook her head.

"You're not showing a bit."

"Yes, I know."

She must have heard the disappointment in my voice because she reached out and gave my hand a squeeze.

"Oh, don't worry, Blue. You'll start showing any day now. And in a few months you'll be lucky you can walk without waddling."

I smiled at her. "I look forward to waddling. I can't wait to be a mother."

"Have you always wanted to be one?"

"In the back of my mind, yeah, but now that I'm actually pregnant I feel like a kid waiting for Christmas day."

~

WE ATE lunch in an interrogation room while talking over the case.

The woman we were looking for was named Donna Weaver and she had been missing since before I was born. Donna Weaver had been a beauty with long blonde hair and blue eyes. She was smiling in each of the three photos we had of her, and in one of them, she was hugging a young girl. That girl was her daughter, Shannon Weaver, now Shannon Reed, who was the driving force behind getting the case reopened.

Detective Olson, who I was already calling Carol, handed me a current photo of Shannon Reed. She looked a great deal like her long missing mother, but there was no smile on her face and her eyes held a haunted look.

"What is she like? I hope she doesn't have any unreasonable expectations. The odds are we won't find her mother, given how much

time has passed."

"Shannon is very realistic about the odds. She's just determined to do everything possible to solve the mystery of what happened to her mother. She knows that her mother wouldn't have abandoned her. That's why she's been looking for her since she was a girl."

"It sounds like she loves her mother a great deal."

"She does, Blue, and it broke Shannon's heart when her mother failed to come home."

"You like her, don't you?"

"I do, and she's been a big help. She's not just a family member of our missing person, she's also a private detective. She's done about as much as she can do on her own and now she's asked us to reopen the case."

"Those cadaver dogs you've got coming here could solve the case tomorrow. The most likely scenario is that Donna Weaver was wounded in the shootout while running off into the woods, to later die of her wounds."

Carol nodded in agreement.

"That's what I think too, but I hope we're wrong. I would love to see a miracle here and have Shannon reunited with her mother."

"What was her mother doing hanging around a drug dealer anyway?"

"The same old story. A good girl falls in love with a bad boy. It was love at first sight from what I hear, and it may have cost Donna Weaver her life."

I grabbed the file that held the photos of the shootout in them. Most were just graphic shots of the eight corpses, men who had died over a drug deal gone bad. A few photos showed the money and drugs that had been at the heart of the deadly dispute. When I read an accompanying list of items found on the scene, I saw that Donna Weaver's purse was listed. However, the amounts of the drugs and the money caught my eye.

"This was all over two thousand dollars and a few ounces of marijuana?"

"Yep, stupid hmm? And Frankie Frugazy, the drug dealer, he and his brother, Tommy were high volume cocaine and pot dealers. The investigating officers concluded that this must have been a first meeting that went wrong, otherwise the Frugazy's would have been dealing more product."

"I see," I said, as I picked up yet another file. This one contained newspaper clippings about Frankie Frugazy, and yes, he had been an up and comer in the drug world. He had also been a suspect in the murder of a reporter that was investigating him. However, Frugazy and his associates had provided airtight alibis for his whereabouts at

the time the reporter was shot to death. The cops could never prove that Frugazy hired someone to commit the murder.

As I stared at the newspaper clippings, Frugazy's face stared back at me in photo after photo. Even though the pictures were faded, grainy, and in black & white, it was plain to see that Frankie Frugazy had been a handsome man. Donna Weaver must have been charmed by the outer package, while not realizing that an ugly drug dealing murderer lived behind the male beauty.

~

DETECTIVE OLSON, Carol, walked me out to my rental as I was leaving to go check in to my hotel. We had just reached my car when Carol smiled and pointed at an SUV that had entered the parking lot. The driver of the vehicle I recognized as being Shannon Reed, but there was a girl who was about ten seated beside her.

The girl turned out to be Shannon's daughter, Holly Reed. Carol told me that Shannon's husband had died two years earlier in a serious car accident. Young Holly was cute with dark hair and her mother's big blue eyes. She jumped from the car and ran over to give Carol a big hug. I could see that the two had bonded. After we were introduced, Holly endeared herself to me as well when she asked me a question.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?"

I answered yes with a huge grin but wondered how she could tell since I wasn't showing yet.

Shannon kissed her daughter on the cheek.

"My Holly has a gift for spotting pregnancy. There have been a few women who answered no and later found out that they were carrying a baby."

"How could you tell?" I asked.

Holly gave a little shrug. "I just know."

We talked about the case for a few minutes and I understood that Shannon was really hoping that the cadaver dogs would locate her mother and end the mystery.

"I stopped believing that she could be alive somewhere years ago. If she were alive she would have come back for me. I just can't stand not knowing what happened to her."

"Maybe you'll be able to end the mystery tomorrow," I said, and when I said it, I expected to be on the scene along with Shannon and Detective Carol. Instead, Prophet's legacy would rear its ugly head. I'd be forced to leave and tackle another case, one that was far deadlier than searching for a missing woman.

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ODESSA, IDAHO, 5:47 a.m.

BOBBY WALKER PEDDLED his bike faster.

The twelve-year-old took his job of paperboy seriously and prided himself on having them all delivered by six-thirty a.m. every morning, come rain or shine.

He wasn't required to finish his route until seven, but Bobby liked getting done early and took satisfaction from being great at his job. The fact that he often received compliments from customers, along with generous tips, only made him more eager. He was determined to be the best paperboy that ever delivered for The Odessa Daily, the local paper.

Bobby was making good time as he guided his bike through the quiet streets on a hazy Sunday morning. Sunday was the toughest day, because the paper was heavier, and it took longer to assemble the different sections. To compensate, Bobby rose earlier on Sundays.

As he neared the several blocks of homes over by the college, which were at the end of his route, Bobby had to swerve around something that was lying in the road.

While it was getting close to sunrise, it was still dark out and it had been a moonless night. Bobby barely avoided hitting the object in the street, as fog was drifting in from off the nearby lake and hugging the ground.

Whatever he had passed in the street was of a good size and Bobby slowed his bike and stared back at it. He could no longer see it well. The swirling fog tended to block his view while causing the object to look indistinct, but it appeared to be a loose sack of grain or something.

Bobby thought about that. If he couldn't see it very well from just yards away, then any car coming along would be certain to run over the sack. He really didn't know if it was a sack or not, but that was how he'd begun to think of it. Whatever was lying back there, it was large enough to do damage to the undercarriage of a car if one ran over it.

Bobby pressed a button on his watch and the face of it illuminated with a green glow. He saw that he had only a short time left if he

hoped to finish his deliveries early.

He would be cutting it close if he paused to drag whatever that was back there out of the street. The delay might make him break his perfect on-time delivery record. The fact that he was the only one who cared if the papers were delivered before six-thirty a.m. didn't matter. He had a plan and he was going to follow it through and keep to his schedule.

Bobby's father was an engineer, while his mother was a pharmacist. Precision and accuracy were in his blood.

He hesitated only an instant longer, then pedaled back the way he'd come. He could hear his mom's voice in his head. It was telling him that he knew what the right thing to do was and that he sure as heck better do it.

Bobby rode his bike over to the curb, got off, and put down the kickstand. He planned to drag the sack out of the middle of the street as quickly as he could and then be on his way again. That plan altered when he heard a moan come from the spot where the sack was. There was also movement. The sack was alive.

Bobby crept closer to the strange object in the street as the hairs on his neck stood on end. The fog did its swirling dance atop the ground, but either a gust of wind or a lessening of the fog's density caused the mist to part and reveal what the sack actually was.

It was a girl. A naked girl.

"Oh shit," Bobby whispered.

The girl had been lying on her stomach, but had shifted so that one firm breast was visible. Her hands were bound behind her back and there were dark streaks of dried blood on the flesh between her legs. Her ankles were tied together as well, and despite the bruising and blood, Bobby found her nakedness enrapturing.

When another moan issued forth from the girl, Bobby broke from his trance and rushed over to her.

"Hey… are you okay?"

The girl's head shifted position until she was looking up at Bobby with one good eye. The other one was swollen shut and there were cigarette burns all over that side of her face. She was nineteen, had dark hair, and the one eye that Bobby could see was a startling blue.

"Help me…" the girl said in a raspy voice, and then she passed out again.

For a moment, Bobby just stood there not knowing what to do, but then he remembered the phone. His Mother insisted that he carry a cell phone as he made his deliveries, although she'd never let him have one any other time.

She had stressed that it was to be used only if his bike broke down or if there was an emergency of some kind. There was an emergency

all right and Bobby took out the phone and powered it on.

His first thought was to call his dad, but then he realized that he needed to alert the police. The girl at his feet needed more help than his dad could give her, she needed a doctor.

Headlights came around the corner up ahead and moved toward the spot where Bobby stood. He stuck the phone back in his pocket and reached down to pull the girl out of the street. Her flesh was chilled and moistened from the fog. Bobby was having trouble finding a place to grip her. She wasn't a large girl, but she was grown and outweighed Bobby by twenty pounds, he made little progress before the car was bearing down on them.

Realizing that he'd never get her out of the way in time, Bobby ran toward the car while shouting and waving his hands in the air. The vehicle came to a hard stop, but because of the slickness of the road caused by the fog, the car slid a little as it braked.

Bobby had shut his eyes tight to brace for the impact of the vehicle, but it stopped just shy of an inch from hitting him. Still, the car was so close that he could feel the heat of the headlights on his skin.

A car door flew open and an angry old man emerged to yell at Bobby.

"What the hell were you doing, boy? I almost killed you."

Bobby recognized the man. His name was Mr. Harper. His son ran the movie theater. Bobby was unable to find his voice and so he just pointed behind him at the girl.

After Mr. Harper's eyes followed the boy's finger, he let out a cry of shock.

"Dear God," Mr. Harper said. He grabbed an old blanket off the rear seat of his car and went to the girl. Within seconds, Mr. Harper had the police on the line and was telling them about the horrible scene he had stumbled across.

The lone girl in the street had been stabbed repeatedly in the abdomen and had spent hours crawling to the spot where Bobby found her. She was the fortunate one. Eighteen of her roommates were found dead inside their sorority house, along with their house mother. All of the girls had been raped and tortured before they died.

Bobby's perfect record at delivering newspapers ended that day, but by the following morning, his face was on every mayor paper in the country. He was being touted as the hero boy who saved the sole survivor of a massacre.

A woman calling herself Prophet was being blamed as having orchestrated the attack, as she had ordered other attacks in recent days, in a bid to extort money from state governments. However, unknown to the media and the public, Prophet had been arrested days

before the attack in Odessa took place.

The true perpetrators of the crime were three serial killers known as Blackwood, Alejandro, and Mitchell. They had to be stopped. To that end, a task force was being formed, a unique team of men and women with special gifts.

Dr. Jessica White and her husband would lead the team, which was named, PREDATOR.

Thomas Lawson hoped to enlist Tanner onto the team as well, not an easy task given the assassin's innate lone wolf nature. Lawson would find a way to convince Tanner to help, he was certain of it.

But first, Lawson needed to gain the cooperation of someone else, a madwoman named Prophet.

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SIGRID TALBOT LOOKED down at her cuffed wrists and swallowed the bitter pill that she would be spending the rest of her life inside a prison.

The forty-two-year-old German expatriate had made her living as a con artist before hatching what she believed would be the greatest act of extortion ever committed.

Sigrid thought up her plan after having met and bedded a young woman who had a unique gift. The young woman, Viola Poe, could distinguish human predators from the rest of humanity the way others could tell a feral cat from a domesticated one.

Most of the predators she came across were serial killers or murderers of some stripe and Viola told Sigrid of her gift, and of the burden it was.

Sigrid didn't see it as a burden, but as an asset, one that she could exploit to gain massive riches. Knowing that Viola had fallen in love with her, Sigrid used the naïve girl to find, contact, and blackmail serial killers.

Many of the killers were living life hidden among the general population, with some having much to lose by exposure. Even the ones who were barely clinging to their humanity feared incarceration and gave in to being under Sigrid's control.

None of the men ever saw Sigrid, only Viola, while Sigrid had taken up the identity of someone named Prophet. Using disguises, poor lighting, and electronic voice manipulation, Sigrid spoke to her new charges over the internet as she organized them into her own personal army of killers.

After months of planning, setbacks, and delays, Prophet launched her criminal campaign. She sent out proclamations to all the major news outlets and to state capitols. Her demands were simple. She was to be paid to call off her army of killers or else they would strike randomly and bring chaos and death wherever they went.

At first, Prophet was believed to be a hoax, an idle threat, or some sort of publicity stunt. Prophet had expected that reaction and had planned to give a demonstration of her power.

The small town of Greenview, Ohio was the first of Prophet's targets. Her army of serial killers wrought violence and emotional

devastation on the town.

After that, Prophet was no longer laughed at and authorities across the country knew that they were facing a unique threat.

Meanwhile, Dr. Jessica White and her husband had recently discovered that Viola and her twin sister Violet were the daughters of Mr. White. White had been seduced by the girls' mother while only fifteen and had just learned that the affair had spawned children.

While they had reunited with Violet Poe, they had yet to connect with Viola, and they feared for her safety when Prophet no longer needed her.

When that day came, Mr. White was there to save Viola from certain death while making a new enemy. The man's name was Blackwood, and along with two other serial killers, Blackwood had sought to kill Prophet.

In the end, both Mr. White and Blackwood barely escaped with their lives after stepping into one of Prophet's traps.

With Viola's help, the authorities stopped the army of serial killers and had finally captured Prophet.

Now it was time to go after Blackwood and his men. To that end, a special task force was being formed.

That task force's codename would be PREDATOR. It would consist of Dr. Jessica White and her husband, Jake Caliber, Blue Steele, and, if he could be brought on board, a man named Tanner, the world's best assassin.

Before that could happen, the man forming the PREDATOR task force needed information only Prophet had to give.

~

THOMAS LAWSON ENTERED the small windowless room inside the Metropolitan Detention Center. After pulling out a scarred wooden chair, Lawson took a seat across from Sigrid Talbot, the woman known as Prophet.

Following the discovery of the massacre at the sorority house. Lawson had ordered that Prophet's arrest remain a secret. He suspected that Blackwood and his men had picked up Prophet's playbook and run with it. If that were true, then Prophet might know where they would be striking next.

That knowledge would give PREDATOR the upper hand and Blackwood and his men could be stopped before they caused any more harm.

Lawson slid a copy of the morning paper across to Prophet and watched her reaction. The bold headline stated that Prophet's army had struck once again. Prophet had been held in a cell that was

secluded and could know nothing about the attack. The paper Lawson placed in front of her had certain text covered by black magic marker so that the town's name wouldn't be visible.

Prophet couldn't hide her shock at the headline, but a moment later, she was smiling.

"You need something from me," she said.

"My name is Thomas Lawson, Miss Talbot, and you may be useful, yes."

Prophet gave the situation more thought and nodded knowingly.

"It's Blackwood. He has a copy of my plans and now he's seeking to gain the wealth I couldn't."

"How would he have gotten a copy of your plans? You two aren't friendly. We know from Viola Poe that you tried to kill Blackwood."

"I was careless," Prophet said. "I left information on a laptop and I'm certain Blackwood found it. Where did that attack take place?"

Lawson shook his head.

"You tell *me* where it took place. If Blackwood is using your information to plan, then you would know where he struck."

"I do know. It could only have been one of four locations. I only had four sites of attack left. They were in different sections of the country, although two of them are in neighboring states."

"Last night's attack took place in the northwest."

Prophet smiled. "Blackwood and his men attacked the town of Odessa, Idaho. You'll find that they hid out in an abandoned barn near the college campus."

Lawson removed a notepad and pen from his pocket.

"I need the other three locations where they might attack."

Prophet leaned back in her seat and smiled at Lawson.

"Let's make a deal, shall we?"

Lawson gritted his teeth and fought the urge to smash Prophet in the face. He then began negotiations for the information. Blackwood had to be stopped.

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BLACKWOOD GAZED out the window of the house he was in and searched the surrounding landscape with an unattached rifle scope. He was a huge man, both tall and wide and his strength was enormous.

Blackwood was in a luxurious home with Alejandro and Mitchell. They were impressed with the care and detail Prophet had taken in setting up the hideouts for her army of serial killers. That army was either dead or imprisoned, but the supplies that Prophet had squirrelled away for them were still available.

The home Blackwood and his men occupied was owned by a wealthy couple off on a world cruise. If anyone came by to check on the property, Blackwood and the others could show them phony ID's. The documents identified them as members of the security firm employed to keep watch over the home. They also had the codes to the alarm system.

There were spare keys for the vehicles inside the four-car garage and enough food to last for days. The weapons cache that Prophet had hidden near the home could have armed over a dozen men. Along with the arsenal was a supply of homemade plastic explosive, with instructions on how to assemble the detonators stored with the yellowish bricks.

"I hate Prophet," Blackwood said. "But I've got to admit, the bitch knows how to plan a raid."

Alejandro, who loved knives, held up a gleaming machete that had a razor-sharp blade. They were still going through the supplies and weapons and each man had found a new toy.

Mitchell, who strangled his victims, had lost the tips of two fingers recently while surviving an explosion. In the sorority house in Oregon, he had found that manual strangulation using his hands was painful and difficult. He was overjoyed to discover a wire garrote with the supplies, and he held it up while grinning.

Alejandro pointed at the garrote.

"That's what you need. It took you forever to strangle those whores back at that college."

Mitchell wiggled the hand with the severed digits. The middle finger was so short that he could no longer use it to shoot someone the bird.

“This is like a career ending injury for a strangler, but I hope we do another college. I can’t get enough of that young tail.”

“No colleges, this time,” Blackwood said. “It would be too predictable. But Prophet left a list of possible targets. There will be young women at all of them.”

“Let me see that list again,” Mitchell said.

Blackwood walked over to Mitchell and Alejandro. They read over the list while it lay atop a table, alongside a map. It was mainly a list of private homes that were located in small communities, many of which had young children or teens. When Alejandro’s eyes fell on a target near the bottom of the list, he tapped it.

“That one, it’s secluded and there will be lots of targets there.”

He was referring to a small town in the desert. According to the facts listed beneath the name, it had only a handful of cops and a population of less than five hundred.

Blackwood rubbed his chin as he spoke to Alejandro.

“Why this place?”

“I passed through there once and you wouldn’t believe how beautiful the women are. It’s a small town, but they’ve got money too. I remember hearing that some celebrity lived there, but I don’t remember the name. It was one of those comedians who got famous by having a Sit-Com, you know the one I mean, there was a monkey in the show.”

“If we whacked a celebrity that would make the news all right,” Blackwood said. “But if people in the town have money they might also have private security. It could be why the police force is so small.”

“They won’t be expecting anything like us,” Alejandro said. “And who knows, we might find money and jewelry there too.”

“That’s a good point, plus, I always hated that damn monkey the guy had.”

“What about this target?” Mitchell said, as he laid a finger on a location by using his good hand.

The line he was pointing at gave the name of a religious retreat. It was located miles from anything else, but was in the same area of the country where the town Alejandro favored was located. According to the information Prophet supplied, there were estimated to be upwards of eighty participants at the retreat. They would predominately be young women.

Blackwood thought about it and nodded.

“Hmm, that’s a good choice too, but we’d have to take out their cell tower before we went in. The place is too big to use signal jammers. Also, we’ll lose some of the women if they run off into the desert.”

“We won’t lose any if we attack hard and take over quickly, plus, the desert will help us. If they run off into the desert they’ll have nowhere to go,” Mitchell said.

“I don’t like it,” Alejandro said. “If any cops showed up we’d be easy to pick off in the middle of nowhere.”

Mitchell shook his head in disagreement.

“That other sheet Prophet left has escape routes and hiding places for each target. If we do it right, no one will know we’ve been there until we’re long gone.”

Alejandro nodded as he looked over the details of the religious retreat.

“Hmm, there’s a maze of tunnels nearby, some old mineshafts and a map to get through them. Still, I like the idea of going after the town. It’s got more ways in and out and there’s a city a short drive away.”

“Let me think about it for a while,” Blackwood said. “And I want you guys to stay alert in case someone is onto us.”

“Someone? Like who?” Mitchell said.

“That tall dude that was with the twins, that’s who. One of those girls claimed that he was their father. If I were him, I’d be looking for us.”

Alejandro laughed. “That dude spooked you, didn’t he?”

When Blackwood glared at Alejandro the laughter died in the smaller man’s throat.

“He didn’t spook me, but he’s one of us, you saw that. If he’s as tough as I think he is, he’ll be coming for me sooner or later for hurting his girl. I just want to be ready for him.”

“There’s three of us,” Mitchell said. “Even if by some miracle he found us, he wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Blackwood considered that, then thought of something else.

“Let’s hope that he doesn’t have any badass friends.”

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TANNER, with Sara Blake, rode along a city street in Los Angeles.

Sara had received a call from Thomas Lawson earlier that morning and was told that he wished to speak to her and Tanner in person. When she informed Lawson that she and Tanner were in California, Lawson said that he would arrange a secure location where they could have a video conference.

Both Sara and Tanner had assumed that Lawson wanted to talk to them about a contract for an assassination. Tanner realized it was something else entirely when Lawson revealed that Dr. Jessica White and her husband would be attending the video conference. There would be others as well, and Tanner had an idea of what Lawson had in mind.

"He's trying to build a team around White," Tanner said, as Sara drove them to where the meeting would take place.

"What sort of team?"

"Some sort of off the books special forces team would be my guess. White's not an assassin, but he's nearly as deadly as I am."

The meeting was to take place in a new building where Lawson had an executive suite of offices.

Sara nibbled at her bottom lip as she thought things over. They were driving through a rundown section of the city as they headed toward a tall office building that was visible in the distance.

"Lawson still must need someone killed. That's why he called you, but I'm confused as to why he would involve Dr. Jessica White. She's not an assassin."

Tanner smiled. "Jessica is like you; she can handle herself in a fight."

A moment after saying those words, Tanner shouted for Sara to stop the car. She pulled the vehicle to the curb near a fire hydrant and Tanner opened his door to get out.

Sara called to him. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back."

Sara watched Tanner weave between traffic as he headed across the street. She left the car and followed Tanner, who had just entered an alleyway. The narrow space sat between two brick buildings that were boarded up and had For Sale signs on them.

Just before she entered the alleyway, Sara heard what sounded like a muffled scream. The scream was followed by a cry of pain. When she rounded the corner, Sara saw that Tanner had embedded a blade into the chest of a man holding a baseball bat.

Tanner gripped the bat as the knifed man collapsed to the garbage strewn alley floor, then he turned to face three more men. The men were struggling with a woman whose top had been torn away. One of them had his pants around his ankles.

Sara understood that Tanner must have spotted the woman being dragged into the alley and had come to her aid. She marveled at the assassin.

She had once thought Tanner to be nothing more than a heartless killer, but his humanity and decency made themselves known often. Without a thought to his own safety he was willing to face-off against four men.

Tanner caught a thug under the chin with the bat and the man grunted and fell backwards. When one of the two remaining men fumbled for a gun in his waistband, Tanner whirled the bat around and struck the would-be rapist between the legs. The scream that followed told Sara that the man's testicles had been crushed by the blow. She watched as he slid down along the alley wall with his hands cupped over his crotch, moaning in agony as he did so.

The gun the man had been reaching for tumbled to the ground. When Tanner bent over to claim it, the fourth and final man took off running while holding his pants up with one hand.

Sara brought out her gun just as the man grew close to her, but received a warning from Tanner.

"Don't fire your weapon! We don't need to bring the cops running."

Sara lowered her arm, but then brought the gun up fast and struck the punk on the side of the head. The man staggered and Sara hit him with the weapon again, and then again. That last blow rendered the fourth man senseless.

The woman in the alley made it to her feet and seemed unconcerned that her breasts were exposed. Sara took a good look at her, saw the glittery shorts, the spiked heels, the over made up face, and came to the conclusion that she was a prostitute. After the young blonde gave Tanner a guarded look, she sent him a nod along with the word, "Thanks."

Tanner nodded back, and the woman covered herself as best she could with her torn blouse and hurried away.

Tanner hustled along behind her. The hooker turned left at the alley's entrance and walked away. A few people had stuck their heads out of windows, while others stood in the doorways of local shops.

The commotion in the alley having caught their attention.

Tanner ignored the gawkers, took Sara by the arm, and headed to where they'd left the car. Within moments, they were back on the move.

Tanner turned to look at Sara and found her grinning as she drove along.

"What's with the smile?"

"You risked your life to save that hooker from being raped. I'd say that makes you a hero."

Tanner laughed. "I'm no hero. I just won't stand by and see anyone abused like that."

"Whatever you say," Sara said, and the smile stayed on her face.

~

A SHORT TIME LATER, Sara and Tanner entered a new glass tower. They were escorted by building security to a small conference room where a sealed envelope awaited them.

The envelope contained instructions as well as a list of who would be attending the video conference. Besides Jessica White and her husband there were two names, Jake Caliber and Blue Steele.

"I remember reading a newspaper story about Jake Caliber recently," Sara said. "I mean the grandson, not the grandfather."

"Why was he in the paper?" Tanner asked.

"He was attacked by a biker gang in Texas and there were about a dozen men. Apparently, Jake Caliber killed them all while saving a woman's life."

Tanner cocked an eyebrow.

"That's impressive. It sounds like something old man Caliber might have done. Guts and ability must run in the family."

"I don't know who this Special Agent Blue Steele is, do you know him?" Sara asked.

"Yeah, I've heard the name a time or two, and Blue is a woman. She's a bounty hunter and one that I never wanted on my trail. From what I've heard, she's the best there is."

"Lawson does know talent when he sees it, now let's find out what's going on."

When the connection was made on the large computer monitor, Tanner and Sara found themselves looking at a conference room in New York City. Lawson was seated at the left of a round table. Seated on the other side of the table were Dr. Jessica White, her husband, and a man who Tanner assumed was Jake Caliber. He resembled the much older and more famous Jake Caliber.

"I had an idea we might meet again someday, White," Tanner said.

“But I thought it would be in person. Anyway, I take it that this isn’t a social setting?”

Lawson leaned forward a bit and stared at them from the screen. “I need your assistance, Tanner, and I think you’ll admit that I’ve been helpful to you lately, yes?”

Tanner nodded in agreement. Lawson had proven to be a useful man to know. Recently, Tanner had to deal with serious trouble in the town of Killburry, Connecticut, where a criminal organization known as The Brotherhood tried to kill him. Tanner instead destroyed The Brotherhood and Thomas Lawson was helpful during the aftermath.

Tanner had been living in Killburry under the identity of Tom Myers. Thanks to Lawson, Tom Myers was a name that Tanner could keep using when he needed to appear as an average citizen. Lawson had also been helpful in other ways, and there was the fact that Tanner liked him. The man seemed like a straight shooter. That was a rare quality in a government type.

“I’ll listen to what you have to say, Lawson. After that, I make no promises.”

“Fair enough, and Miss Blake, this concerns you as well.”

Sara broke from her trance and looked at Lawson. She had been staring at Mr. White. His resemblance to Tanner was plain to see, in particular, they shared the same intense eyes. Sara cleared her throat before speaking.

“Maybe we should all be introduced properly, hmm?”

“Yes,” Lawson said. “Excuse my manners, but time is of the essence.”

When Jake Caliber was introduced, his eyes lingered on Tanner as he squinted at him. Caliber was in his thirties, nearly as tall as Mr. White, and had dark good looks.

“You’re a hit man, Tanner, aren’t you?”

“I prefer the term trained assassin,” Tanner said.

“I saw your face on a flyer being passed around by some Mexican cartel a while back. Their leader wanted you bad.”

“He got me, and now he’s no longer around.”

Caliber looked at Lawson. “Why is Tanner involved in this?”

“I’m hoping he’ll join us. We could use his help.”

“A hit man? He’s the type of guy we should be going after, not partnering up with.”

Tanner let out a sigh. “Give us your spiel, Lawson. I’m running out of patience.”

“The reason we’re speaking Tanner has to do with the recent attacks by Prophet and her group of serial killers. I’m sure you’re aware of what’s been going on.”

“Of course. Those attacks have been all over the news. Is that what

this is about? You want me to find and kill Prophet?"

"No, we have her in custody, although we've not released that information to the press yet."

"Why not?" Sara said. "People would be relieved to know that she's no longer a threat."

As Sara spoke, Lawson had been checking his phone as he read a text. When he looked up, he spoke to Sara.

"I'll explain everything in a moment, Miss Blake. Blue Steele will be joining our video conference from a location in southern New Jersey. Blue has already been briefed by me."

When Blue's picture appeared, Tanner studied her face and smiled as a gleam entered his eyes.

"Blue Steele?"

Blue stared into the monitor as her own eyes widened. Tanner's resemblance to Mr. White had startled her.

"You're Tanner?" Blue said.

"I'm Tanner."

Seated beside him, Sara could tell that Tanner found Blue Steele to be attractive. The jealousy welling up inside her was both a surprise and a source of wonder.

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AFTER I RECOVERED from the shock of how much Tanner resembled White, I concentrated on the meeting. I had always had a crush on White and Tanner was nearly as handsome as he was. I reminded myself that I was a married woman and put my mind back on business.

Lawson had reduced our pictures on the screen until they filled a row at the bottom of the monitor. An image appeared above them that showed a woman with dyed red hair being escorted along a corridor while shackled in chains. It was Prophet.

"That is Sigrid Talbot," Lawson said. "She's the woman who called herself Prophet. She was placed in custody after Blue Steele tracked her down in California."

Jake laughed. "Blue, you got the bitch? You're something else, cousin."

"Yes," Lawson said, while smiling at me. "Blue is exceptional at what she does, as are all of you. But, getting back to point, the reason we haven't announced Prophet's capture has to do with these men." Lawson hit a button on a remote and the likeness of three men appeared. They looked like they were taken from the men's driver license photos. Lawson hit another button and one of the photos grew larger than the others.

"The man on the right is Terrance Blackwood," Lawson said. "Blackwood and the other two men are serial killers. Blackwood is nearly seven feet tall and weighs over three hundred pounds. He is not fat, but muscular, and by all accounts he's insanely strong. Our source also claims that Blackwood dabbles in cannibalism."

After memorizing Blackwood's face, I saw that Jake and Tanner were doing the same. I then took noticed of Mr. White's posture. White leaned forward slightly as Blackwood's photo was enlarged, while his visible hand had curled into a fist. Whoever Blackwood was, White had personal business to settle with him.

The middle photo grew larger as Blackwood's photo shrank.

"This man is Juan Alejandro. He is Mexican, of average height and build, and speaks Spanish, English and Portuguese fluently. Alejandro likes to kill his victims with a knife."

The final photo was enhanced and Lawson gave the blond man a

name.

“Curt Mitchell, he’s six-two and weighs one-eighty. Mitchell is a rapist who learned to kill after one of his victims sent him to prison at nineteen. He resumed raping women when he was released, but he never left a living witness behind again. Somewhere along the way the killing became more important to him. Our source says that he’s killed both men and women. His preferred method is strangulation. He uses his bare hands.”

Lawson made all three photos equal size again, reduced them, and enlarged our pictures.

“The attack in Odessa, Ohio last night was done by Blackwood, Alejandro, and Mitchell. They have access to Prophet’s playbook and are running with it in the hopes that another state will pay to make the violence stop. Although Prophet’s plan wasn’t the success she hoped it would be, she did receive payment from one state that gave in to the extortion. Blackwood is hoping to get more states to pay and has set-up offshore accounts while issuing new demands.”

I smiled in understanding.

“They’re the reason that you haven’t announced Prophet’s capture. If they knew Prophet was in custody, they would stop following her plan, correct?”

“Yes, Blue, that is correct,” Lawson said.

“Prophet is your source, isn’t she, Thomas?” Jessica said.

“She is, and she’s told us that there are only three communities left on her target list. These three consist of two small towns and one religious retreat for women. They’re spread apart geographically. One of the towns and the retreat are in neighboring states, Texas and Arkansas, while the other town is more distant and is in California. Mitchell is a pilot, so it’s not inconceivable that he, Blackwood, and Alejandro could steal a small plane and fly to any of the targets.”

“What do you want us to do?” Tanner said. “The feds must be all over this info.”

“We’re the only ones who have this information, Tanner. Although, I do have a traditional strike force standing by. Once we know which target Blackwood and his men will hit next, that area will be surrounded with law-enforcement agents.”

Tanner smiled as understanding came to him.

“You want Blackwood, Alejandro, and Mitchell dead. If they were arrested that wouldn’t happen.”

Lawson nodded. “Yes. These men have run out of chances. Those girls they killed last night along with their other victims have marked them as unfit to live in society. I want you people to get to them first… and I want them put down. If any of you have a problem with that, we’ll agree to part ways now.”

“I won’t just kill someone in cold blood, Thomas,” I said. “Not if they’ve already surrendered to me.”

“And I wouldn’t ask you to, Blue. But these men are animals, the last thing they want is to spend their lives in a cage. In all likelihood, it will either be kill or be killed.”

“Since Sara and I are in California I guess that means that Blackwood and his crew could be here too?” Tanner asked.

“That’s right,” Lawson said. “One of the targets is a town about a hundred miles north of Los Angeles.”

Tanner and Sara Blake spoke softly to each other for a moment and I found myself wondering if they were lovers. If not, they definitely shared a connection of some type. When their conversation ended, Sara spoke.

“There’s an assassin named Maurice Scallato who murders other assassins. He tried to have Tanner killed by surrogates while we were in London a while back. Tanner’s decided to hunt Scallato down and kill him before Scallato makes another attempt on his life. It’s why we’re in California.”

“Ah, Scallato has come to my attention,” Lawson said. “He was the same man who survived being buried alive after that earthquake caused a mudslide.”

“That’s him,” Tanner said, “and now we have word that he may be in Sicily. I’m willing to help, Lawson, but we have a late flight to catch tonight too.”

Lawson took out his phone and used the memo function to write a note to himself.

“I’ll look into Scallato and see if my overseas contacts can give you any help in locating him.”

Sara brightened at the news. “Thank you, Mr. Lawson, we could use it.”

“Tell me where to look for Blackwood and I’m yours for the day,” Tanner said.

Lawson smiled. “Thank you for agreeing to help. We’ll be splitting up into three teams. Tanner, you and Miss Blake will be Team One, Dr. White and her husband will be Team Two, and Mr. Caliber, you’ll be joining Blue and form Team Three. The first team to make contact with Blackwood and his men will call in the others. I have a jet standing by for the teams here, while Tanner and Miss Blake will have access to a helicopter.”

“What if we don’t find them?” Sara said. “There are many places to hide even in a small town.”

Lawson smiled apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I should have made it clearer. Prophet’s playbook had a list of sites at each area where her men could stage themselves before

they attacked. You'll be checking out those sites. Once a team has verified that a staging site has been used, we'll know what their target is. If you and Tanner locate them in California, I'll send the other teams in to help."

Tanner shook his head. "I'll handle Blackwood and his men alone. Besides, if they're not here I won't have time to fly to another location and help out before I have to leave for Sicily."

Jake scoffed at that.

"I won't need your help, hit man, and what are you going to do if we don't get a chance to shoot Blackwood and his guys in the back with a sniper rifle? Your kind is only useful if you can sneak up on someone, right?"

Tanner sent Jake Caliber a placid smile.

"If we do get a chance to meet later I'll give you a personal demonstration of what I can do with just my fists."

Jake laughed. "You'd shiv me in the ribs as soon as I got the upper hand in the fight. I don't know why Lawson picked a criminal to help us, but understand something, I don't trust you."

I watched Jessica turn sideways as she glared at Jake with an angry expression.

"Tanner saved my life at the risk of his own a few months ago, so maybe you shouldn't judge the man before you get to know him."

Jake looked taken aback by the passion in Jessica's voice.

"He really saved your life?"

"Yes."

Jake looked at Tanner and shrugged.

"Maybe you're not the scumbag I think you are."

Tanner smirked. "What's that mean, that I might be a different type of scumbag?"

"Hey, I was trying to apologize for jumping on your case," Jake said.

"Why don't we just try to stay out of each other's way," Tanner said.

"Fine by me," Jake said.

"It's not fine," Mr. White said. "We may have to depend on one another before this is through. I need to know that you won't let each other down. I had a run-in with Blackwood once; he's not to be taken lightly."

"I think my rep speaks for itself, White," Jake said.

"And we've already worked together," Tanner said. "Don't worry, White. Caliber and I don't have to like each other to get the job done. If Sara and I locate Blackwood and the others, we'll put them down before they can hurt any more kids. What they did inside that sorority house… they're unfit to live."

Jake grinned. “Tanner, you and I finally agree on something.”

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MY COUSIN, Jake Caliber, embraced me in a bear hug and then held me out at arm's length to look at me. I felt bad about being pulled off the case in New Jersey. However, I knew that with the cadaver dogs and their handlers doing all the work I would have just been standing around anyway. I'd much rather be on the hunt than be idle, and I loved seeing my Cousin Jake.

"Married life agrees with you, Blue, but I thought Mother said you were pregnant."

"I am pregnant; I'm just not showing yet."

"You will, and you really do look happier than I've ever seen you."

"Married life is great, but what about you, have you and Kelli set a date for the wedding yet?"

"We have, expect to find an invitation waiting for you when you get home."

"How's your grandfather doing?"

Jake grinned at me. "The old man has a new girlfriend who is about my mother's age."

I laughed. "Oh, that's great. I won't be surprised if he makes it to a hundred-years-old. Age never seems to slow him down much."

The two of us were parked on the side of the road about a mile from our destination in the southwestern section of Arkansas. Jake had driven there from an airfield to rendezvous with me, while I had arrived just minutes earlier. Our target was the easiest to reach, even though it was as secluded as the other suspected hideouts. We only needed to make a quick hike through a thick stretch of trees and we would reach the clearing where the cabin listed on the map was located.

After checking our weapons and donning hiking boots, Jake and I headed for the cabin.

We came upon it after twenty-five minutes, the last ten minutes of which we slowed our approach to look for signs of danger. However, one look at the clearing and we both relaxed. It had rained in the area overnight and the muddy ground around the cabin was undisturbed. The only marks on the ground's flat moist surface were those made by birds or small creatures, such as squirrels.

"It looks like Blackwood isn't here, but let's go take a look

anyway," Jake said.

"Oh yeah," I agreed. "And don't forget, Lawson wants us to remove any supplies Prophet left stashed here too."

"Right," Jake said, and then he went silent as he moved toward the front of the property, while I made my way around to the rear.

Within minutes, we were inside and were certain that no one else had been in the cabin for some time. We gathered up the supplies Prophet had hidden beneath the floorboards in the kitchen, while making two trips to carry it all away. When I used one of the satellite phones to call Lawson, we both heard the concern in his voice over our discovery.

"Plastic explosives? Are you certain that's what they are, Blue?"

"Yes, Thomas. There were even typed instructions on how to assemble triggers for them."

"I'll alert the other teams that they might be facing more than guns. Tanner and Miss Blake just informed me that they've neared their destination, but they have to make a long hike to reach it. Meanwhile, Dr. White and her husband are still en route to west Texas. We should know within an hour or so whether or not Blackwood is there. Head back to your jet and I'll call you when I know more."

After we packed up our vehicles and changed out of the muddy boots, Jake and I decided to stop in the nearby town to get something to eat and have a beer. The jet that Jake had flown in on needed a minor repair before taking flight. We had time before we needed to be back onboard. Also, we were both curious to see the little picturesque town close up.

After parking in the center of the tiny downtown area, we headed toward the town's only watering hole, a tavern named, The Mirage.

"Lawson said that Prophet chose this town because of the quaint look it has. She thought that seeing this community ravaged by a gang of serial killers would shock the nation," Jake said.

"Her whole plan was to make people demand that she be paid to stop the attacks, instead, people pleaded with officials that she not receive a dime," I said.

"Yeah, but she did get that one payment for a quarter of a mil; that's why Blackwood and the others are following her plan. They're also as insane as Prophet."

We left our cars and walked into the local tavern for a quick beer. On the way inside, we passed a pair of large motorcycles. As we headed for a booth near the windows with our eyes still adjusting to the dim light, our way was blocked by two large and bearded men.

One of the men placed a massive hand on Jake's shoulder while the other man stood before me, blocking the way forward. The man

looked me over while licking his lips, and I could see a glint of lust in his dull eyes. The pair were obviously brothers or some other close relation, and there was gleeful anticipation showing in their grins.

Jake was tall, but these two were a pair of giants. They were dressed in jeans and matching black leather vests. A look around the tavern revealed that the other patrons' features were full of fear, while two women had tears streaking their faces.

"What do you two want?" Jake asked them.

The hand on his shoulder tightened as the man leaned down and spoke to him.

"We want to spend some time with your woman; she's a hot one."

Jake looked over at me.

"It looks like that beer will have to wait."

~

IN CALIFORNIA, Tanner and Sara reached the abandoned farm that Blackwood and his men might be using as a staging area. The farm was located by traveling on foot and staying low inside a dry trench that had once been a stream. There was an old fire tower located nearby and so stealth was essential. If Blackwood or one of his men were on watch inside the tower, they would spot a vehicle approaching from miles away.

From where they stood among a copse of trees, Tanner and Sara could only make out the top portion of the farmhouse. They decided to approach it from separate angles. Differing from the forest they had just traveled through, the terrain surrounding the farm on two sides was flat, but held fields of weeds and knee-high grass. They were wearing bullet-proof vests and had armed themselves with scoped rifles. After agreeing to meet at the front steps, Tanner and Sara split up and made their way toward the house.

Sara used her scope after every hundred feet to check for movement in the home's dust-covered windows. She saw none, nor did there appear to be any other signs of recent habitation in the old two-story farmhouse.

To her surprise, when she came upon Tanner at the front of the home he was standing and staring at the structure with an odd look on his face. After taking a glance at the front steps and seeing no shoeprints in the dirt that coated the stairs, Sara walked over and stood beside Tanner.

"What is it, Tanner? Why do you look so strange?"

Tanner raised an arm and pointed at the home.

"This house… I grew up here."

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IN ARKANSAS, I sized up my opponent as Jake stared into the face of the huge man whose hand gripped his shoulder like a vise.

"She's not my woman," Jake said. "She's my cousin, and if you know what's good for you, you'll take your hand off me."

The man laughed at him as he tightened his grip again. In response, Jake jabbed two fingers into the man's eyes. At that same moment, I kicked the other man between his legs. At first, the giant didn't react, then a sick expression came over him and he groaned loudly and hugged himself as I changed position.

Meanwhile, the other man was shouting that he'd been blinded, he hadn't been, but Jake had jabbed him hard enough to cause tears to eclipse his vision. Before he could recover, Jake drove a boot heel into a knee and the man lost his balance. While the giant was down on his knees, Jake slammed an elbow against the side of his head several times, which caused the man to pass out.

The man's brother recovered enough from my kick to threaten Jake.

"You're gonna pay for that."

Jake grinned at him. "Look behind you."

The bearded giant turned his head just in time to see my foot coming toward him. The second blow to his privates did more damage than the first one had. He moaned, vomited, and fell flat atop the floor.

That's when the door opened and filled the pub with light, as the town's chief of police entered. He was an older man with a weathered face and alert gray eyes. When he saw the two big men lying on the floor, he took off his hat and smiled. He looked first at Jake, and then at me.

"I can't wait to hear this story."

~

"WHAT DO you mean you grew up here?" Sara asked Tanner.

Tanner's arm had been extended as he pointed at the farmhouse, but his gesticulation turned into a sweeping wave of the hand that took in the entire structure.

“This house, it looks just like the home I grew up in down in Texas.”

“You grew up in Texas?”

Tanner appeared annoyed at himself for having revealed part of his past, but then he shrugged.

“Yes, I was raised in Texas and our ranch house looked the same as this place. I want to see the inside.”

The door on the old house was unlocked. They entered cautiously as the muted sound reached their ears of rodents scampering for cover. What little furniture remained in the home was dusty and falling apart. Tanner and Sara swung their flashlights around as they stood in the entryway, then, Tanner raised his left arm and pointed at the staircase.

“It’s just like my house, including the large landing that leads to the second floor.”

Tanner began walking down the home’s short hallway with Sara following behind him. They passed through a door on the right side that opened onto the kitchen, where a table with three legs lay on its side. Around the table were six chairs, but only two of them were sitting upright.

Tanner walked toward the back and Sara saw that the door in the rear wall led to an enclosed porch. A door to the left of that door led to what had been a dining room, but there was no furniture in the room.

They moved back into the hallway and near the entryway was a living room with an old couch and several dust-covered tables and ancient floor lamps. The shades of the lamps were so old that their material hung in tatters, likely from age.

“Is the layout the same as the home you grew up in?” Sara asked.

Tanner nodded yes and moved toward the staircase. The old steps creaked mightily but they held their weight, and soon they were exploring the bedrooms. The upstairs was also like the home he’d grown up in. Tanner swallowed hard when he saw that the room that would have been his sisters’ room had a set of matching beds in it. Dust and grime had come inside the room through a broken window and covered every surface. Still, from all appearances, its former occupants had been a pair of young girls.

The sight of the beds made Tanner think of his lost twin sisters, and he found that he had to fight back tears.

After taking a look through the remaining bedrooms, he moved downstairs and back outside.

Sara followed, then stood nearby while watching him. She had recently learned that he had been the sole survivor of the slaughter that destroyed his family. She knew that, even as tough as Tanner

was, being in a duplicate of his home had to be… unnerving.

"It's almost an exact copy. There was a half bath on the first floor of my house that this place doesn't have, but other than that…"

Sara reached out and took his hand.

"You miss your family, don't you?"

Tanner nodded, and after giving Sara's hand a quick squeeze, he released it and began walking away from the home.

"Let's head back. We'll fill Lawson in as we walk."

"All right," Sara said, and she was glad to hear the huskiness in his voice. Although Tanner hadn't shed a tear, he had been troubled and affected by the rush of emotion the farmhouse had elicited from him.

Sara watched Tanner from the corner of her eye as something tugged at her heart. Although she didn't name it, wouldn't name it, deep down, she knew that what she was feeling toward Tanner was a burgeoning sense of love.

~

AS HER HUSBAND drove them toward their destination in West Texas, Jessica finished her phone call.

"That was Lawson, Tanner and Sara checked out their location and found it empty. Tanner also told Lawson that he would cancel his trip if you thought you needed him."

"Call Lawson back and tell him that I give Tanner my thanks for helping out but to not cancel his flight. Besides, this might all be over before Tanner could reach the area."

The location Jessica and her husband were checking out was in west Texas, at the edge of the desert. It was a large secluded home surrounded by hills on three sides. Mr. White drove their rented vehicle up a steep dirt track, but killed the engine as the SUV began to bounce violently over the rough terrain.

"It looks like we're on foot from here, but we should get a good look at the house from this height."

After reaching the top of the hill, they looked down on the modern home and saw signs that someone had recently been there. The garage door was left open and someone had littered with a beer can and an empty bag of potato chips.

"There's no wind here today," Jessica said. "That empty bag could have just been tossed or it might have sat there for hours."

White had been looking through a rifle scope. When he lowered it, he pointed toward the left side of the house.

"You're right, but I see tracks in the dirt that look like they were made by more than one man. One particular pair could be Blackwood's, since they're huge shoeprints. I need to go down and

check things out."

"You mean that *we* need to go down and check things out, right?"

White smiled as he caressed his wife's face.

"I'm not trying to cut you out of the action, but one of us should stay back. If Blackwood and the others are down there, we'll need to alert Lawson to send in Blue and Jake Caliber. If we're both captured or busy fighting back, that call might never get made."

"All right, but if you determine that no one is down there then signal for me to join you."

"I will," White said. After giving Jessica a quick kiss, he lowered himself over the side and carefully made his way down the steep hill.

Within moments of reaching the ground, he was inside the garage. Shortly thereafter, he appeared at the front of the house and waved for Jessica to join him. Once she was at his side, he led her into the home and showed her the evidence that Blackwood had been there.

Jessica stood in the home's office and began studying the papers and maps left behind.

"They were here all right, but we still don't know what target they've chosen. From what I can gather looking at these papers, they're either targeting a town or a religious retreat."

White took out the satellite phone and dialed Lawson.

"It's time to gather together and go on the attack."

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AFTER JESSICA and Mr. White had contacted Lawson and relayed what they'd found at the home in Texas. Jake and I arrived by helicopter and joined them inside the house. It was a very nice house but had been left in a state of disarray by Blackwood and his men.

A map lay atop a table with two locations circled. One was a town that had wealthy citizens and a small police force, while the other was a religious retreat that contained all women. Time was not on our side and we had to choose one target to go after while leaving the other one for the authorities to investigate. Prophet had failed to tell Lawson that this location had more than one target available, but it was little surprise to us that she wasn't completely reliable.

Lawson had made it clear to Jake and me that Mr. White was in charge. I was surprised when White tapped a finger atop the map and indicated the location of the religious retreat.

"Why there and not the town?" I asked him.

He smiled sadly before answering.

"The young women at the retreat will be too much of a temptation for Blackwood to pass up."

"Maybe, but it also seems like a pattern after they attacked that college dorm. They might want to avoid developing a pattern."

The sad smile returned. "Trust me, Blue. They're classic serial killers, especially Blackwood. He won't be able to resist a target that's rich with defenseless young women."

I stared at him as a feeling came over me. It was one I'd had around White before whenever I'd looked deep into his intense eyes. It was fear, just a touch of primal fear, and I knew that he was deadlier than Blackwood would ever be.

I smiled at him, smiled at my friend and nodded.

"Let's go get them."

~

THE CHOPPER SPED us toward our destination but dropped us off miles away from it. If Blackwood saw a chopper drop down anywhere near the retreat he would abort his attack. Lucky for us, the sun was going down and the desert was cooling off.

We trekked through the desert at dusk with night-vision monocles at the ready and carried canteens on our hips. It was little more than an hour's walk but the shifting sand was treacherous and made the hike seem longer.

Before boarding the chopper again, I had placed a call to Detective Carol Olson. She gave me the news that the dogs had failed to find the body of Shannon's mother.

"At this point, I'm beginning to wonder if the woman might not still be alive, Blue. I really thought that we would have located her remains today."

"We'll just have to start over and look at things from a new angle."

"We? Does that mean you're coming back here?"

"Yes, I don't like leaving things undone and I'm very good at finding people. If she is alive, I'll locate her."

"I'm glad you're coming back, but I have to tell you, the department will only give me another week to look into this case before I have to move on."

"I hear you, Carol, but a lot can happen in a week."

"True, so when are you coming back here?"

"I'm not sure, but I will be back there soon. The mystery has me intrigued."

"Be safe, Blue, and I'll see you."

~

WHITE SPOTTED the shapes first and he wasn't even wearing his night-vision.

The shapes turned out to be a pair of vehicles parked just off the road. There were three sets of footprints in the sand leading away from them.

"We aren't the only ones who wanted to make a silent approach," Jake said.

Jessica touched the hood of one of the vehicles.

"It's still warm. They must not have been here for long."

White grimaced. "They've probably reached the retreat by now. Let's hope that they're still disabling the cell phone tower and knocking out the electrical power. They won't begin their attack until they do. The power outage will likely cause the women to gather together. That will make things easier for Blackwood, Alejandro, and Mitchell."

"Once the women are alone in one spot, Blackwood and the others won't waste any time," I said.

"Exactly. So let's hustle," White said.

~

OUTSIDE THE RETREAT'S main building, Blackwood watched as Alejandro scrambled down from the cell tower after disabling the equipment. They had brought along signal jammers, but didn't want to rely on them. If even a single 9-1-1 call made it out they would have to abort. They didn't want to abort, they wanted to spend the night torturing and raping women at their leisure.

"I messed up the wiring enough so that it's useless," Alejandro said. "Now we just have to take care of the power."

"I sent Mitchell to do that. According to Prophet's notes, the breaker boxes are kept in the rear of that large tool shed."

Alejandro began walking off toward the shed.

"I'll give him a hand and then we'll meet you back by the cafeteria area. The women are sure to gather there once the lights go out. Solar panels back up the refrigerators and freezers; I bet it's the only room that will have light."

Blackwood laughed.

"Prophet thought of everything. Tonight will be even better than that college we did."

"There are more girls here and I can't wait to try out my new machete."

"Right, but stay out of sight until the lights go out, then we'll give it ten minutes and pounce."

Alejandro flashed a devilish smile and disappeared amid shadows.

Blackwood walked toward the building while using a pair of night-vision goggles and staying hidden behind a wooden fence. He stopped suddenly when he saw movement through the slats. It was a young woman.

She was petite with long dark hair. She held a bible in one hand and bottle of water in the other. The young lady had been walking with her head down, and so when Blackwood appeared in front of her, it startled her. Surprise turned into a look of amazement when she took in the big man's great height and size.

Before she could speak or utter a scream, Blackwood reached out and cupped her face. His huge hand all but enveloped her entire head. The woman attempted to grip his wrists, but her small hands were useless against him. Muffled sobs came from her as her eyes grew wide with terror.

"Don't struggle, honey, if you do, I'll crush your skull like an egg."

When Blackwood felt the woman's tears fall upon his hand, he smiled.

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ALEJANDRO HAD to duck out of sight behind a row of trash bins. A group of women had left one of the outer buildings and were headed for the main house.

There were only a few vehicles on the property, two shuttle vans and a pair of old Chevy pickup trucks. The retreat had an older couple that acted as the facility's handyman, chauffeur, and cook. But Alejandro and the others had watched them leave the property and head home as they were arriving in the area.

The old couple wouldn't return until early the next morning. Alejandro giggled to himself when he imagined the horrific sights that would greet the elderly couple's eyes.

As he neared the shed, he saw that the door was sitting ajar. The combination lock and the hasp it had been attached to were laying on the ground. It appeared that Mitchell had used a pry bar to gain entrance and Alejandro could hear someone moving about inside.

As he moved closer, Alejandro realized that the noise he was hearing were the sounds of a struggle. One of the women must have come across Mitchell and he was doing her in with his garrote.

When the door burst open, Alejandro saw that he had been partially correct. Mitchell's garrote was being put to good use, but it was around his own neck. Behind Mitchell was Jake Caliber, and Caliber was choking the life out of Mitchell.

Alejandro was a lover of knives, but he had his new machete hanging across his back on a strap. The weapon was to be used to intimidate the women at the retreat. Alejandro unslung the long deadly blade and headed toward Jake. When he caught swift movement coming from his right he froze.

~

JESSICA and I had checked out the side entrances of the main building and found that they were still locked up tight. While we were doing that, Jake went off to scout the shed where the main power could be shut off, and White headed toward the front entrance.

We saw quite a sight as we neared the shed. Jake was strangling Mitchell with his own garrote while Alejandro fumbled at some sort of

sword or machete he had strapped across his back. Whatever it was it looked razor sharp. Without thinking about it, I rushed toward Alejandro with my only thought being to protect my cousin.

Alejandro either saw my approach from the corner of his eye or heard my footfalls, but by the time he turned to look at me, I had left the ground. My flying kick caught him square in the mouth, causing him to release the long blade. It skittered away as he tumbled backwards.

I had landed on my left side. Alejandro leapt to his feet and charged at me while cursing in Spanish. My kick had done damage to his mouth. I saw blood and what looked like a piece of broken tooth fly from it, but it hadn't slowed him down any.

A knife appeared in his hand as I reached for the gun on my hip. I never had to use it. Jessica appeared behind Alejandro with his dropped machete. She used it like a baseball bat and slammed the flat side of the steel across the back of his head.

The sound of the impact made me wince, but then I sucked in air from what happened next. As he fell, Alejandro landed on top of his own knife. Eight inches of serrated steel buried itself in his stomach.

Within moments, Alejandro's shirt grew darker from the spread of his own blood, and I knew that he would bleed out before long. As Jessica helped me up, I saw that her gaze was directed at Jake, who was now standing over the dead body of Mitchell.

Jake's shirt collar was ripped away, and an ugly welt was on the left side of his neck. It was clearly visible in the dim glow given off by the lights that lit the pathways.

"Mitchell almost got me with that garrote, but I turned the tables on him."

"And Blackwood, have you seen him?" Jessica asked.

Jake shook his head and we all moved toward the front of the main house. White was alone. If Blackwood caught him by surprise even White might fall victim to the huge man. Jessica led the way, running in a near panic as she thought of her husband facing off against that monster alone.

~

THE MONSTER that was Blackwood was living up to his reputation. He had rendered the young woman he'd attack unconscious. Afterward, he had dragged her off behind an outbuilding that held potting supplies and other materials for the retreat's communal garden.

Blackwood's head jerked up just as he was about to remove the woman's blouse. He sent a whisper into the darkness beyond the circle of illumination created by the flood light that hung above a carport.

He received no answer.

"Mitchell, Alejandro, is that you guys?"

Blackwood went on alert and stood, then turned around in a slow circle as he put his hand on the gun that was holstered on his hip.

"Who's out there?"

Still no answer, and then it occurred to Blackwood that the lights should have been disabled already. That meant something may have gone wrong. As a tingle went down his spine, Blackwood suddenly knew without question what that something was.

After letting out a laugh, he addressed the darkness.

"You tracked me down, didn't you? Somehow you tracked me down."

"Yes."

The voice that uttered the single word came from the darkness and was followed by the sound of a shotgun being racked. Not being a fool, Blackwood lifted his hands in the air, then sighed when he spotted Mr. White emerge from the shadows to his left.

"What's your name?" Blackwood asked.

"You can call me White."

"Well, White, you might as well pull that trigger right now. If you don't, I promise that I'll find those twin girls of yours someday and I'll do things to them that would turn your stomach."

White shook his head. "You're trying to enrage me so that you'll have a quick death. It won't work."

The sound of movement came from the side of the building and Blackwood sent White a grin. He believed that it was Alejandro and Mitchell approaching. When Jessica and the others appeared and went to White, Blackwood hung his head. He knew that he was out of chances. Or was he?

While Jessica was checking on the condition of the unconscious girl, Jake Caliber yanked the gun off Blackwood's hip to disarm the huge man. Blackwood took a swing at him. Jake ducked the blow and Blackwood's fist bent one of the slender steel corner posts of the carport as if it were made of tin foil.

Jake moved away from Blackwood as White aimed the shotgun at Blackwood's knees.

"Try to hit one of us again and I'll cripple you for life," White said.

Blackwood cursed, knowing that he was finished. But Blackwood would rather die than spend the rest of his life behind bars. He was going to force White to kill him.

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“HEY WHITE, I hurt your girl good, didn’t I? When I smashed her head in I was trying to kill her, you know?”

I was standing next to White when Blackwood started taunting him. I could see White’s eyes grow cold.

“Don’t listen to him,” I said. “He’s only trying to goad you into blasting him with that shotgun. The last thing he wants to do is to spend the rest of his life in prison.”

“The guy over there, I recognize him,” Blackwood said. “That’s Jake Caliber. He’s a badass, but why did you bring the women along? Were they bait for me and my men? You should have brought those daughters of yours instead. I still want a taste of them, and if I ever get close enough I’ll tear them apart.”

White said nothing, but even in the sparse light I could see that his face had reddened.

When Blackwood next opened his mouth, he spewed pure vile and described in graphic detail the things he wanted to do to White’s daughter, Viola. I’d learned that Blackwood had once had the girl in his grip and had hurt her badly in White’s presence. To taunt White the way he was, Blackwood was asking for death.

White’s grip on the shotgun grew tighter, but then he surprised me by handing it to me.

“Good idea,” I said. “Let me hold it, that way you won’t be tempted to kill him and he can rot his life away in a cell.”

White said, “No Blue, he dies now,” and then he ran toward Blackwood.

~

AS WHITE RUSHED TOWARD HIM, Blackwood laughed, while Jessica let out a shriek of “No!”

The two men came together as each reached out and their hands locked together just above shoulder height. White was tall, very tall, but Blackwood towered above him and outweighed him by over a hundred pounds.

Still, as the two men struggled against each other, I realized that they were more evenly matched then it would appear. Not only was

White holding his own, but he was stronger than Blackwood, as well as enraged. That immense strength and righteous rage enabled him to stand toe to toe with the huge man and wear him down.

Jake, Jessica and I watched as realization crept across Blackwood's face, a face turned scarlet from the effort he was exerting. Along with fear, amazement crept into Blackwood's eyes. He had never before met a man who could best him physically.

After one of Blackwood's knees buckled he tried to twist away and managed to free one hand. It soon became apparent that White had released the hand on purpose, so that he was now behind Blackwood.

After driving a foot into the back of Blackwood's other knee, Blackwood fell atop the ground. With Blackwood on his knees, White repositioned his grip, by placing both arms about Blackwood's head. He then attempted to give the huge man's neck a vicious twist, but Blackwood was too strong for such a maneuver.

And yet, as Blackwood gripped both of White's wrists, intending to break White's grasp, I saw that White was steadily wrenching Blackwood's head to the left. White also kept the man from rising by planting a foot on the back of one leg.

They struggled together until they both fell to the side and, moments later, a groan escaped Blackwood's lips, as one hand twitched in a vicious spasm. When White released Blackwood and stood, it became obvious that Blackwood's head was sitting at an unnatural angle. White had done serious damage to the man. He had broken his neck.

Spittle flew from Blackwood's mouth as he attempted to speak.

"Can't move… I… can't move."

Those words were followed by a gasp as only Blackwood's right hand showed signs of movement, the gasping grew more intense and it was plain to see that he was struggling to breathe.

Jessica hugged her husband as the four of us watched Blackwood's face turn a deep shade of red. Despite being a doctor, Jessica made no move to help Blackwood. Any disdain I might have felt at her inaction was cut short when I remembered the photos I'd seen of Blackwood's victims. I had zero sympathy for the man and I stood there and watched him die.

~

THE UNCONSCIOUS WOMAN awoke while on her way to the hospital after an ambulance had taken her away.

As usual, Lawson's clout had cleared the way for me and the others to leave the scene under the guise of secrecy and in the name of Homeland Security. The local cops who arrived on the scene soon

became aware of who and what Blackwood, Alejandro, and Mitchell had been. The bodies were carted away by a team of federal agents.

~

WE ALL DECIDED to stay the night at a local hotel and rose early the next day. After having breakfast together, the four of us were at the airport and heading off in different directions. I was stopping home for the day before heading back to New Jersey, while the others headed for their homes. As we were saying our goodbyes, Jake made an observation.

"Lawson wanted Blackwood and the others dead, and dead they are. Does that make us a hit team?"

White stared at him for a moment before answering.

"We simply gave them what they deserved."

I nodded in agreement and then grew angry as I thought of something.

"The woman who started all this, Prophet, she made a deal with Lawson that will see her spend the rest of her days in a country club prison."

To my surprise, Jessica smiled.

"Thomas did make that deal with her, yes, and he'll keep his end of the bargain. But if I know Thomas, Prophet won't escape justice."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Just this, Thomas knows the best assassin on the planet, Tanner. He may have promised Prophet that she would be placed in a country club prison, but I would bet he never promised her that she would grow old there."

I gasped in surprise as my first reaction told me that Thomas would be condoning murder. That reaction faded as I recalled all the havoc Prophet was responsible for. Over a hundred lives were lost because of her insane greed. I knew the world would be better off without her.

"Justice," I said.

The three of them nodded solemnly as they all repeated the word back to me.

A short while later I put Prophet and Blackwood out of my mind and turned my thoughts toward the case I'd left in New Jersey.

Donna Weaver, missing for nearly forty years, and leaving behind a brokenhearted daughter who only wanted answers.

I would do my best to get those answers for her, but first, a quick trip home to see my darlin' hubby was in order. I laid a gentle hand atop my stomach as I thought about our child, and I marveled at the fact that I was soon to be a mother.

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THE NEXT MORNING, I was sitting on the floor beside the bed and crying when Ramón entered our bedroom. Scattered around me were every pair of jeans I owned.

Ramón rushed to me and helped me up. After cupping my face in his hands, he asked me what was wrong.

"Nothing's wrong. These are tears of happiness."

"I don't understand," he said.

I gestured at the pants scattered at our feet.

"Nothing fits, not even my fat jeans, and look at me, there's a bulge showing."

I was wearing a blouse, and as I lifted it up, Ramón grinned at the bulge showing on my tummy.

"I told you our baby wouldn't be flat," he said, as he leaned over to kiss my stomach.

~

AFTER A TRIP to the store to buy new jeans, bigger jeans, I boarded a flight back to New Jersey. A lot had happened since I'd been gone and it all seemed like good news.

A reporter had learned of Shannon Weaver's quest to find her missing mother. The story had appeared in the paper along with a picture of Shannon's mom, Donna Weaver. The story had led to a number of tips being reported and Det. Carol Olson invited me to come along and check out the ones that sounded promising.

I was seated next to Carol in her unmarked police car and sensed that something was bothering her. When I asked about it, she opened up and told me that she had reconnected via telephone with her estranged mother just hours earlier.

"That's good news… isn't it?"

"Yes, but the only reason she called was to tell me that she may be dying. She's been diagnosed with cancer."

I reached over and gave Carol's free hand a squeeze.

"I'm so sorry, but is there a chance that she could beat it?"

"Oh, yes, Mother says that there's an excellent chance, but I still worry."

“Of course you do, but once she recovers you two will still have reconnected again.”

“Maybe, but… here’s the thing. My mother never wanted me. I think she only had me to please my father, and I’m sure she only married him because he was well off financially. My father adored me, but once he passed away, Mother told me that she saw no reason for us to stay in contact.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, she’s always been a cold woman. I think her illness may have shaken her and now she realizes that she needs someone.”

“Are you going to be there for her, you know, if things take a turn for the worst?”

Carol looked at me and I could see that her eyes had grown moist.

“Of course I’ll be there for her, she’s my mother and I love her.”

We drove in silence for a few moments and then I asked a question.

“Have you ever thought of having children, Carol? You seemed to adore being with Holly the other day.”

Carol lit up in a smile. “Holly is a sweetheart and we clicked right away, but I’m a divorced woman nearing forty. I think my chances at motherhood have flown. Besides, with the mother I had, I always feared that I would be a horrible parent too.”

“I doubt that, and we never know what life has in store for us.”

~

WE SPENT several days eliminating most of the tips that came in while at the police station. However, four leads from people in the area were promising enough to follow up on and investigate in person.

Three of the four tips fizzled out, but as we drove to our final appointment, something about the contact’s name seemed familiar. When I mentioned it to Carol, she enlightened me.

“William Barr is a retired photojournalist. He’s the man who took most of the photos we have of Frankie Frugazy. It seems he had a vendetta against the man. The reporter that Frugazy allegedly killed was Mr. Barr’s friend. Barr hounded Frugazy night and day while trying to catch him involved in something shady.”

“This sounds like a real lead. Was Mr. Barr following Frugazy and his gang on the day they died?”

“No, he was in the hospital at the time recovering from a hit and run accident. Mr. Barr swears that Frugazy paid someone to run him down, but he was unable to prove it before Frugazy died.”

“Still, he may know something that could be of help.”

“That’s what I’m hoping, Blue.”

~

WILLIAM BARR TOLD us to call him Billy as we were invited into his small home. He was an old man with an infectious grin and bright bluish-green eyes. Just before we entered the house, Billy's name was called by a neighbor who was getting into her car. She was an older woman with curly white hair who still had a shapely figure.

She gave Billy a predatory smile and walked over to talk. Her name was Pam Woolrich; she was a retired nurse who was also a widow. Pam had recently inherited the home across the street after her mother passed away, and she was volunteering several days a week at a local clinic.

Pam's crush on the handsome Billy was evident, and although Billy responded to her with courtesy, I could see that he was uncomfortable by her attention.

"I'll be making pot roast tomorrow, Billy. I'll bring some by for you. It's too much for me to eat alone."

"That's very kind of you, Pam, but you really shouldn't go to any bother," Billy said.

Pam sent Billy a bright smile. "It's no bother; I miss cooking for a man."

Billy told Pam that he would see her tomorrow and then the three of us said goodbye to her. After we'd entered the house, Billy closed the door and leaned back against it.

"That woman is looking for a second husband and she never takes no for an answer."

"She seems very nice," I said.

"She is, and one hell of a cook too, but I'm a lifelong bachelor and plan to stay one."

Billy walked with a limp and said he had been doing so since recovering from the hit and run accident he survived decades earlier. He seemed eager to be of help and said that he remembered Donna Weaver, although he had only seen her a few times.

Billy gestured about his living room. It was cluttered with stacks of cardboard boxes.

"These contain old photos and at least some of them are of Frankie Frugazy and his gang. I had taken photos of Frankie with many different women. Your missing mom was one of them."

"A new photo of her would be nice, but how well did you know her?" Carol asked.

Billy shrugged. "Not well at all. I pulled her aside once to tell her what a dirt bag Frankie Frugazy was, but she wouldn't hear any of it. The girl was in love and it blinded her."

"Did she ever mention a location outside the state, somewhere she

might have run to?" Carol asked.

"No, nothing like that. As I said, I barely knew her, but see, Frankie's brother, Tommy, he had a girl that was a real looker, a redhead. I bet she would know something. I can't seem to remember her name to save my life, but if I find a photo of her I'll have her name written on the back."

"What makes you think that this woman would know something?"

Billy looked confused as he furrowed his brow.

"She was with Frankie and Tommy right before the shootout went down. I'm thinking that your missing mom and her both ran off together and then something went wrong somehow."

Carol and I both leaned forward as Carol held up a hand.

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that a second woman might have been on the scene when the shooting occurred?"

"Yes, I was in the hospital back then, and later, I went through months of therapy. But see, there was a bar owner I knew named Henley who used to tell me whenever Frankie and his boys showed up at his tavern. Henley came to see me a few days after my accident. He said that Frankie and his crew had stopped into his bar right before they left for their ill-fated drug deal."

"And he told you that there were two women with Frugazy?" I asked.

"Yeah, your missing mom and Tommy's redhead. They had to of both been there when the trouble went down."

"Why didn't you report this to the cops at the time?" Carol asked.

"Henley said that he would tell the cops, and remember, I was still in bad shape back then and full of painkillers. As far as I knew, Henley had reported it to the detectives handling the case. He must have forgotten to, or just blew it off. Henley wasn't a fan of cops."

Carol had her notebook out as we were talking. When she asked Billy for the name of Henley's bar, he just smiled at her.

"Sorry Detective, but Henley's bar closed over twenty years ago and Thad Henley has been dead nearly as long. It has been a long time since all this went down you know?"

Carol sighed in frustration, but then her gaze fell on the cartons full of photos.

"Can we help you look for the photos, Billy?"

Billy Barr grinned his infectious smile and I found myself grinning along with him.

"Detective Olson, I thought that you would never ask."

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AFTER WE'D FINISHED SEARCHING through the cartons, we came up empty in our search. We hadn't found a photo of either Donna Weaver or the mysterious redheaded girlfriend of Tommy Frugazy.

Billy Barr was perplexed by the development and said that there were hundreds of photos missing. He was also sure that the absent photos were ones he would have taken around the time period that the deadly shootout occurred.

"Could someone have taken them?" I asked.

"I don't see how. I've always lived alone and I've been in this house for over forty years."

"You've never lived anywhere else during that time or maybe stored files elsewhere?" Carol asked.

Billy was in the middle of shaking his head when he froze and snapped his fingers.

"Katie! My sister Katie, she and her husband insisted that I come and stay with them back then while I recuperated from my injuries. She lives in Pennsylvania. I bet that's where those files are."

"Will she still have them?" I said.

Billy searched for his cell phone and found it stuffed between the couch cushions.

"There's one way to find out; I'll give my sis a call."

~

A SHORT PHONE call later and we were relived to find that Billy's sister still had his photos.

"She said that there are four cartons sitting in a corner of her basement. I'll drive out there tomorrow and get them."

"Where does she live?" Carol asked.

"About two hours away, and I've been meaning to make the trip anyway. I'll drive out tonight and spend the day with them tomorrow. I've a grand-nephew I haven't seen yet, and he's named Billy too."

Carol stood and stretched a kink out of her back. We had both been sitting on the floor as we went through the hundreds of old photos and it had caused a bit of stiffness.

"I really appreciate the help, Billy, and please call me as soon as

you find anything."

"Certainly, and tell your friend that I remember her mother. I always thought she was too good for a thug like Frugazy."

~

WE HAD dinner with Shannon Reed and her daughter Holly at a family restaurant, and Holly surprised me with me a gift. It was a drawing that she had done from memory. It was an excellent likeness of me.

"You're very talented, Holly. I hope that you're planning on becoming an artist."

"Maybe Blue, or I might become a cop like Carol."

"Stick to art," Carol said. "Police work will wear you down."

We told Shannon and Holly about our day and I saw Shannon brighten with hope.

"Another woman was in the car? That would make sense, wouldn't it? But there was no trace of her."

"Yes, and she also never came forward," Carol said. "That means that she may have something to hide. Perhaps she helped your mother away from the scene and panicked afterward. In any event, if we locate her, she'll be able to answer a lot of questions."

We talked over several scenarios but soon realized that speculation was useless. If and when Billy found a picture of the woman in question, we would still face the task of identifying and locating her. That's something that could be difficult to do given that well over thirty years had passed.

The following day was a Friday and Holly had school, while Carol was going to her mother's house which was three towns away. Her mother had invited her to stay for a few days so that they could try to grow closer.

As we stood outside our vehicles in the parking lot, I watched as Holly gave Carol a big squeeze before getting on her tip toes to kiss her on the cheek.

As Donna and Holly drove off, Carol made an observation.

"If I could be certain of having a kid as sweet as Holly I'd get pregnant right away."

I smiled, touched my stomach, and prayed that my own child would turn out as well.

~

AN HOUR LATER, I was in my hotel room, showered, and laying across the bed while talking to my hubby.

“I miss you, Blue. Any chance that you could be coming home soon?”

“Maybe,” I said, and then I told him about the lead we had.

“That sounds like a longshot,” Ramón said.

“It is, but who knows, once we have the photo and the woman’s name, we may track her down right away. If I had to guess, she helped Donna Weaver get away from the scene after Donna was wounded. Donna likely died afterward, and the woman panicked and ran off.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t Donna Weaver’s body have been found?”

“Sure, but if she died out of state she may have been listed as a Jane Doe. Remember, this all happened many years ago. The police back then would have no reason to tie her death to a drug shootout, plus, her body may not have been discovered for weeks.”

“I see what you mean. In any event, this sounds like a less risky case then your usual ones. Thank God you won’t be in any danger.”

I agreed with Ramón. At the time, I had no idea that before it was all over two people involved with the case would be dead.

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THREE MORE LEADS came in overnight and the next day Carol and I checked them out.

One of the leads was from a man who used to run with Frugazy's gang. He remembered the redhead and also recalled the fact that she spoke with a slight southern accent, but he couldn't recall her name. His tip involved the drug deal. According to him, the deal was for much more than the paltry sums listed on the police report. He insinuated that the investigating officers must have pocketed most of the drugs and the cash.

As we were driving to check out another tip, I asked Carol what she thought of the man's claims.

"Anything's possible I suppose. Still, the officers who had the case back then were both decorated cops and went on to top positions inside the department. From everything I've heard about them, I doubt they would have been crooked."

"Have you spoken to them?"

"No, one man is dead and the other is on his last legs in a nursing home in New Orleans. Besides, they weren't aware that there might have been another witness to the shootout."

"Our mystery redhead?"

"Yeah," Carol said, and I could see that something was bothering her.

"Carol?"

"Yeah?"

"Is something wrong… is it your mother?"

"Yes, it's my mother, but not anything to do with her health. I caught her going through my purse last night."

"Seriously? Why would she do that?"

"Get this, she said that she was looking for drugs, like I'm some kind of high school girl she has to check up on. We wound up getting into an argument and I stormed out."

"But you'll be going back to stay with her, won't you?"

"Yeah, Blue, pain in the ass or not, she's still my mother. I'll be there for her when she needs me. The woman just has to learn that there are boundaries."

"Do you have any siblings?"

“Nope, it’s just me and my mother. That’s why it hurts so much to not get along with her, but I’m trying, I’m really trying.”

“You’re a good daughter. Maybe this health scare will make your mother realize just how lucky she is.”

“Maybe, but I’m not holding my breath.”

~

THE OTHER TWO leads turned out to be dead ends and so Carol drove me to where the shootout had taken place. It was at the wide intersection of two roads and looked to have changed little since the time of the shootout. One side of the road displayed farmland while the other side was all woods. Every minute or so a car would drive by, but there was little in the area to attract much traffic.

Carol gestured to an area near where we were parked.

“One of the local farmers came upon the scene while he was driving his tractor to another field. His brother was a cop the next town over, and he called in the homicide detectives. The thing is, even if the mystery redhead and Donna Weaver left the scene, where did they go? There’s not much around here now and there was even less back then.”

“Could they have taken a third vehicle?”

“It’s possible, but each side had four men and they had pulled their cars onto the sandy shoulder of the road. You’ve seen the report, the tire tracks all matched the two vehicles at the scene. The women must have walked through the woods or cut across a field, but that’s quite a hike, and we know at least one of them was bleeding.”

“It could be done if the wound was minor, but then why would Donna Weaver abandon her daughter?”

“Exactly. I sure hope that Billy Barr finds a picture of that redhead along with her name, otherwise, this case could be coming to a dead stop.”

~

WE LEFT the scene where the shootout had occurred and headed back into the city. As she was driving, Carol gave Shannon a call and was surprised to learn where she was. She put the call on speakerphone so I could listen in on the conversation.

“What do you mean you’re at Billy Barr’s house? How do you even know where he lives?”

“I’m a private detective, remember? Finding William Barr’s house was easy. I just want to be here when he returns. I have to see if he’s found a new lead.”

“He may not be happy to see you camped out on his front steps, and by the way, where’s Holly?”

“She’s here with me.”

“Shannon, honey, Billy Barr might not return until late. Why not go home. I promise you that I’ll call as soon as I know something.”

“No, I need to know as soon as I can… and besides, you told me that he may have more pictures of my mother. You don’t know how much I would love to have more pictures of her.”

Carol grew quiet. I assumed she was thinking about her relationship with her own mother. She and her mother were both alive and had been estranged for years, meanwhile, Shannon would give anything just to see an old picture of her mom.

“Shannon, this is Blue. We’ll be there in a few minutes to pick up Holly and take her out for a bite of dinner, okay?”

“Thanks Blue, she is getting a little restless.”

We arrived and Holly lit up when she saw Carol. She was torn about leaving her mom alone, but promised her that she would bring back a burger and a milkshake.

Carol made one last appeal to Shannon. Billy Barr had called as we were driving over and said that he was on his way home but wouldn’t be back for another hour.

“Does he have pictures?”

“He sure does, eight of your mother and three with the redhead.”

“Eight new pictures,” Shannon whispered, and appeared awed by the bounty of new photos headed her way.

“Come eat with us and we’ll return after,” I said.

Shannon shook her head. “I’ll wait here, but thanks for taking Holly. She gets cranky when her dinner is late.”

Holly stuck her tongue out at her mom and we all laughed, then, mother and daughter shared a hug. We left Shannon sitting in her car with the pledge to bring back food for both her and Billy Barr.

~

WHILE WE ATE, Holly drew a picture of our waitress on the back of her paper placemat. The young woman was delighted by the drawing. She told Holly that it was the best tip she had ever received.

Holly then told us that a lady had been waiting on Billy’s porch when she and her mother arrived at the house.

“What did she look like, honey?” I asked.

Holly tilted her head to the side as she recalled the woman’s face.

“She was old, but not real old, and she had white hair.”

Carol and I smiled at each other. The woman must have been Billy’s neighbor, Pamela Woolrich. Pam must have been there to chip

away at Billy again.

"I'll bet you that Pam gets Billy to marry her within a year," Carol said.

I shook my head. "No bet. I think you might be right."

~

WE RETURNED with food for Shannon and Billy and were glad to see that the old man's car was in the driveway. However, as we approached the steps, I could see that the front door was sitting ajar and that the home was dark inside. Carol and I exchanged worried glances and then she called out from the foot of the steps.

"Shannon, Mr. Barr? Hello?"

There was no response and so Carol reached into her purse for her gun.

"Blue, please walk Holly back to the car."

"I will, but call if you need me, and be careful."

"What's going on?" Holly said. She was young, but not so young that she couldn't tell that we had both tensed up.

I led her by the hand back to the car as Carol entered Billy's home. When a light came on inside the house, I let out the breath I'd been holding in. But then, when Carol didn't appear in the doorway to wave that all was well, I began to worry again.

She was gone long enough for me to consider leaving Holly alone to check on her, but then she stepped out onto the porch.

Carol's face was white and there were tears in her eyes. She was on the phone with what I assumed was the police dispatcher. Something horrible had happened inside that house. Without saying a word, Carol walked over and took Holly in her arms. One look into her eyes and I knew that both Shannon and Billy were dead.

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TWO DAYS LATER, I was seated across from Carol inside the police station as I studied the crime scene photos. The coroner's report had just been released and contained no surprises or clues.

Shannon Reed and Billy Barr had each been shot three times with a 9mm. weapon. It was suspected to have been used with a homemade silencer. Bits of cotton wading were found at the scene, while the next-door neighbor on the right reported hearing only three shots. The makeshift silencer failed after three rounds before the noise had become noticeable.

The pictures of our mysterious redhead were nowhere to be found along with the other photos Billy had gathered from his sister's basement. Whoever killed Billy and Shannon did so in order to gain possession of those pictures. Only a few people even know that he had them.

Through falling tears, little Holly told us that she was sure her mom hadn't told anyone but her about the photos. Shannon's phone records confirmed this. She had only phoned Carol and had also made a short call to her elderly mother-in-law. That was to confirm that she and Holly would be visiting on the weekend.

Of the six text messages Shannon had sent to clients of hers, none of them were of a personal nature.

As far as we could tell, only Billy, myself, Carol and Holly knew that Billy Barr was locating photos that had significance to the case. A very cold case had suddenly become red hot and spawned a double homicide.

I was even more determined to see everything to the end. Doing so would be easier said than done since we had no suspects.

We interviewed Shannon's clients and found that her work didn't seem to intersect with the type of criminal that would commit a cold-blooded double homicide. Plus, if someone from her past had killed her, why would they take a bunch of old photos from the scene? No, the murders were linked to the first case that concerned Shannon's mother. I was certain of that.

When I looked up from the crime scene photos, I saw that Carol was wiping away tears.

"You're thinking about poor Holly, aren't you? I cried for her too."

Carol grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her eyes.

"I'm sick with grief and worry for Holly, but no, I was crying for myself. Last night my mother told me that she never wanted to see me again."

"Why would she say such a thing?"

Carol made a sound of disgust.

"It's simple really. She discovered that she wouldn't need me after all. Her tests all came back negative and she now has a clean bill of health."

"Well… that's great news, but I still don't understand why she would drive you away again."

Carol sighed. "We had a big argument over Holly."

"Holly?"

"I want custody of her, Blue. You've seen her grandmother, that old woman might be the only family Holly has left, but she's in her eighties and in ill health. How is she going to raise Holly?"

"She won't, and then Holly would be placed into foster care."

"Exactly, but before that happens I can take her in and even adopt her. When I told my mother what I had planned she went ballistic. She started telling me how stupid I was to want to take on a burden like that. See, to my mother, children are burdens. That's all I ever was to her, a burden."

I let a moment of silence pass before I spoke.

"Carol, have you talked to Holly about this?"

A smile spread over Carol's face.

"Holly hugged me so tightly when I told her I wanted her to come stay with me."

"How's her grandmother feel about it?"

"Actually, I think the old lady is relieved. She loves Holly to death, that's plain to see, but she also knows that she's not in a position to raise her properly. She's willing to let me have her."

"That's great. You two seem to share a bond already and Holly is blessed to have you be there for her."

Carol pointed to the case files.

"I really need to find her mother's killer. If I don't do at least that, then how do I ever look Holly in the eye again?"

"We'll figure it out," I said, and even as I spoke the words I wondered if I was lying.

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MY BEST FRIEND Becca called me as I sat in the tub in my hotel room and soaked.

I often took a long hot bath when I had a problem to think over and this current case was a mystery I needed to solve.

After Becca and I discussed my pregnancy and my joyfully expanding baby bump, I used her as a sounding board and discussed the case with her. Becca has surprised me more than once by coming up with an angle or an insight that I had missed. Once again, she placed me on the right track.

"I don't know, Blue, but this redheaded woman, how old would she be now?"

"Hmm, she'd be in her late-sixties, maybe even in her seventies."

"Well, is there anyone involved with the case that could be her?"

"There is, a neighbor of William Barr's named Pamela Woolrich. Carol and I checked her out. She had an alibi for the time of the murders. She was also living in another part of the country back when Donna Weaver went missing."

"Oh, well there goes my idea."

Becca and I talked a little longer as she told me the latest news about her kids and her husband, Richie. We hung up after making plans to get together soon.

Despite the fact that Billy's neighbor, Pam, had an alibi, I began thinking about her. Had she been the redhead we were looking for? Surely Billy Barr would have recognized her from when they'd met in the past. Then again, so many years had passed in between and she could have changed significantly.

My mind was racing over the case as I climbed from the tub and dyed off. After throwing on a robe, I paced about my hotel room like a caged tiger as I ran over everything I'd seen and heard since coming on the case.

When the answer struck me, I came to such a sudden stop that I actually tripped forward a few steps before regaining my balance.

I rushed to my phone and looked through the contact list. Holly's grandmother answered on the fifth ring.

"Miss Steele? Yes, Holly is still awake but she was getting ready for bed."

“I need to see her tonight. It’s very important.”

“Does this have something to do with Shannon getting killed?”

“Yes ma’am; I’m hoping it will lead me to her murderer.”

“Come right over. That dear girl was like a daughter to me and her killer needs to pay.”

I dressed in a flash and headed to see Holly.

Before I left the sad little girl that night, I had evidence that would lead to her mother’s killer. Unfortunately, it would also break a friend’s heart.

~

CAROL WAS SURPRISED by my late-night visit but seemed happy to see me. She was dressed in a pair of old jeans that were speckled with pink and white paint.

“I’ve been painting my spare room for Holly and tomorrow I have new carpet coming.”

Carol was flushed with happiness about the opportunity to raise Holly. Knowing how unhappy I was about to make her saddened me, and she saw it on my face.

“What’s wrong, Blue?”

“Let’s sit. There’s something I need to show you.”

Carol looked down at the file folder I was holding.

“Is this about the case?”

I nodded.

After giving me a worried look, Carol waved for me to follow her, and we were soon seated at her kitchen table. Her townhouse was of a good size with plenty of room to raise a child. I hoped that what I was about to reveal wouldn’t destroy her.

“I just came from seeing Holly.”

“Why?”

“I needed her help. I asked her to draw me a picture.”

“A picture of who?”

“On the day her mother was murdered, Holly told us that she and Shannon had run into an old woman who was there to visit Billy Barr, remember?”

“Of course I remember. She was talking about Pam, the neighbor.”

“That’s what I thought too. And later, when Pam told us that she had seen Holly and Shannon at Billy’s place, we thought that we had confirmed that.”

“We did, didn’t we? Pam said that she had seen Holly and Shannon and also that she had gone over to Billy Barr’s home that day.”

“Yes, but we had it wrong. I spoke to Pam on the way here. She did see Holly and Shannon that day, but only from her window. She

said that she never spoke to them, and she had gone over to Billy's home earlier in the day, before Holly and Shannon ever arrived."

Carol looked at the file folder in my hand again.

"What do you have there?"

"It's the drawing Holly made of the woman she saw that day. Pam has very curly white hair. The woman in the drawing has straight white hair."

Carol held out her hand. "Let me see."

I hesitated, I could guess what seeing the drawing would do to her. As I handed it over, I whispered three words.

"I'm so sorry."

Carol gave me an odd look, and then she opened the folder and stared at the drawing. I saw the recognition in her eyes. It was immediate and was followed by a look of shock, then, there came the face of disbelief that was accompanied by the shake of her head. When tears began to flow, I reached across the table and tried to take the file back, but Carol held on to it tightly.

"Blue… that's my mother."

"Yes."

A sob escaped Carol along with several words that she managed to choke out.

"When she was young… my mother… was a, a redhead."

"I remembered that you told me that you caught her going through your purse. She likely read your notes on the case and found Billy's address. I contacted the oncologist you told me she was seeing. The doctor said that she has no idea who your mother is. I'm guessing that your mother came up with the story of her illness so she'd have a credible reason to suddenly reconnect with you after so many years. When that newspaper story appeared about Donna Weaver, the article mentioned that you were the lead detective."

Carol broke down and cried great tears of grief and pain. As she did so, I sat there quietly and thanked God that my own mother loved me dearly. I could only guess how much pain the betrayal of her mother was causing Carol, along with the knowledge that the woman was likely a cold-blooded murderer.

When the tears ceased, anger replaced them. Carol opened the file and began reading the report on her mother that I'd had my federal contacts send me. Several times I heard the words, "Lying bitch," escape in a whisper. After finishing the file, Carol looked up at me.

"Mother or not, if she's guilty I hope they fry her."

"We'll bring her in tomorrow morning and get to the bottom of things."

Carol shook her head. "I know her, Blue. She'll lawyer up and won't say a word."

“Maybe, but now that we know who the mystery redhead was we can look into her past. Eventually we’ll connect her to Tommy Frugazy. Once that connection is established she’ll have trouble making a jury believe she’s completely innocent.”

Carol moaned as she stared up at the ceiling.

“Oh, Mother, what sort of monster are you?”

I rose from my seat, walked over, and hugged Carol where she sat. I kept holding her as tears once again returned to her eyes.

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I WAS HALFWAY BACK to my hotel room when Carol called and told me that she was going to see her mother.

"That's a bad idea and you know it," I said.

"I can get her to talk, Blue. I know I can. I just have to push the right buttons."

"Will she even be awake? It's nearing midnight."

"So much the better. My mother stays up late and she's always been a drinker. She'll be far from drunk, but she'll be lubricated and the booze might loosen her tongue."

I tried to talk Carol out of the idea but soon realized that I was wasting my time. So when she told me she had a plan, I listened.

~

SOMETIME LATER, Carol and I were entering her mother's house through a rear door by the use of a spare key. As I hid from sight, Carol called out to her mother. It was a large home and I realized that Carol must have grown up with wealthy parents. She would have been much better off having a loving mom than a rich one.

Carol's mother, Margaret Olson, came downstairs wearing a white silk robe and an angry expression. She looked so much like the drawing Holly had made that it caused me to marvel at the young girl's talent.

Margaret Olson was furious with daughter for entering the home without calling. She demanded that Carol return the spare key she had.

"You should have returned that key when I told you that I never wanted to see you again."

"Maybe, but I still hoped that we could stay in contact. I also rushed out of here in a state of emotional distress after you told me that you didn't need me anymore. I even left some of my things behind. But you gave me this key along with the alarm codes. Remember, Mother? I was to help you through your illness."

"You can give it back to me now. As I told you, the doctor said that I'm perfectly fine."

Carol must have flung the key at her mother because I heard it

land on the marble floor and bounce away. Carol then began asking her mother about her early years.

"You know very well that I came here from Boston."

"Liar, I know about your past. You're from North Carolina and your father wasn't a college professor like you always claimed, he was a cheap hood who died in prison."

I peeked out from where I stood and saw Margaret Olson turn a bright red, but then, a smile played at the corner of her lips and a twinkle entered her eye.

"You always were a smart one, Carol. You got that from me. Your father was a good businessman, but he wasn't that bright otherwise."

"Don't talk about Father. Tell me about Donna Weaver."

"That dumb bitch Donna. I can't believe all this trouble started because of her, and she's been dead for almost four decades."

"What happened, Mother? Tell me what happened."

"Yes, I should tell my daughter the cop."

"You might as well. It will still be your word against mine."

Carol's mother released a sigh and began walking in my direction. I held my breath from where I stood in the hallway. While it was true that Margaret Olson didn't know I was there, I was in plain sight. Carol's job was to keep her mother talking and away from my position.

"You think you're so smart, don't you, Mother?"

The footfalls stopped, and then I heard them go back the way they had come from.

"I am smart. I was smart enough to walk away with most of the money and the drugs when Tommy and Frankie Frugazy were killed. A stupid woman would have taken everything and had the cops on her trail. By leaving a little behind, I gave the cops a story they could close the books on."

"But the books weren't closed, because Donna Weaver went missing."

There was silence, but then I heard a whisper.

"Speak up, Mother, I can't hear you."

"I said the stupid girl wanted to call the cops. All that money and she wanted to call the cops."

"You killed her?"

Another pause, and then the words. "I don't know what happened to her."

"She was wounded, wasn't she?"

"It was nothing; the bullet barely broke the skin on her arm."

"You killed her. You killed her for the drugs and the money and now you've killed her daughter too, along with Billy Barr. Damn you, Mother. You're a monster!"

I heard a slap, it was followed by the sound of soft footfalls. I realized that Carol's mother was walking off toward the kitchen. As she made it past the doorway, I heard a shriek.

Two young female police officers walked out of the kitchen holding cans of soda. One of them was black, and she chuckled as she looked at the shocked expression on Margaret Olson's face.

"If I knew you and your mother were going to get into an argument I wouldn't have agreed to hang out with you, Carol. Still, what she said was interesting."

I stepped out of my place of concealment as well. After spotting me, Margaret Olson jabbed a finger at her daughter.

"This is entrapment!"

"Entrapment?" Carol said. "No, Mother, I just invited a few friends over, that's all."

Margaret rushed to a roll top desk and grabbed a letter opener. When she held it up like a weapon, I nearly laughed.

"Get out! All of you, get out!"

"Someone will be here in the morning with a warrant for your arrest," Carol said.

I noticed that she no longer referred to the woman standing before her as Mother.

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WEEKS LATER, I learned that Carol's mother agreed to a plea bargain after damning evidence surfaced. Someone had captured Margaret sitting in her car down the street from Billy Barr's home. The man had been filming his kids at play in his living room.

The street in front of his home was in the background and visible through a large picture window. The young father recognized Margaret as the woman in his video once her face was shown on the news. The time and date stamp on the video placed her near the murder scene and gave the lie to her alibi.

In exchange for pleading guilty to three counts of murder and leading police to Donna Weaver's body, Carol's mother received a sentence of only twelve years. There would be no chance of parole. She would eighty-one by the time they set her free.

~

RAMÓN and I celebrated with Carol and Holly on the day that Carol was given custody of the precious girl.

I was definitely showing and had to wear maternity clothes. Ramón and I had our own reason to celebrate. The baby was coming along perfectly and we had learned that we'd be having a girl.

Holly laid a gentle hand atop my stomach and smiled as she felt the baby stir.

"What are you going to name her?" Holly asked.

"We're thinking of naming her Azul," I said.

Carol smiled.

"That's Spanish for blue, so she'd be named after her mother."

"It's even better than that," Ramón said. "The baby will have my last name, which is Acero."

Carol looked back and forth at us.

"I don't get it."

"Acero means steel in Spanish," Ramón explained. "And so Azul Acero would be Blue Steele."

"That's cute," Carol said. "And men have named their sons after themselves forever. It's time we women did the same."

"We'll see," I said. "We'll see."

But I had to admit, I liked the idea, as well as the name Azul.

~

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, a woman who had gone by many names during a career as a con artist was scheming to escape to freedom.

Sigrid Talbot, who was best known as Prophet, smiled as she walked around the grounds of the Senator Richmond J. Peterson Correctional Institute in Maryland.

It was a beautiful day and Prophet thought that she might even go for a swim once her food settled. She had just eaten a scrumptious meal of steak and lobster while talking to a real estate broker who was doing time for tax evasion.

Prophet's cover story was that she too was incarcerated for evading taxes, while the other prisoners knew her as Susan Tyler.

The so-called correctional institution had no guard towers, while the guards were dressed casually in khakis and polo shirts and carried only Tasers.

The grounds were walled in, but the wall was just ten feet high with no barb wire. Beyond them was a city that an escapee could easily lose themselves in. Prophet had been planning to escape since her first day there, but knew that Lawson must have someone watching her.

She had pretended to be the perfect prisoner in the months she'd been there and was convinced that Lawson had dropped his guard. She'd seen no signs that she was under extra scrutiny or surveillance and was planning to go over the wall when dawn came.

She still had money and a fake ID stowed away at a location half a day's drive from where she stood. She would gather them, head into Mexico, then disappear in South America.

When she caught a momentary flash from up in the hills, Prophet wondered if someone was up there watching her with a pair of binoculars.

The reflected flash hadn't come from binoculars, but rather, from the scope of a rifle.

The first round caught Prophet in the left hip and collapsed her to the ground. It was not an errant shot. It had delivered a message, one that Prophet understood immediately. She had demanded things from Thomas Lawson in exchange for her help and had been given exactly what she asked for. That didn't mean that she had won.

As she lay there feeling the agony of her wound and the terror of impending death, Prophet realized that she had not escaped justice after all. A moment before the second and final round caught her above the bridge of her nose, Prophet understood that she had

underestimated Thomas Lawson.

She was not the first person to make that error, only the latest.

~

Up in the hills, an assassin named Tanner headed toward his escape route while walking at a casual pace. He would meld into the same city streets that Prophet had hoped to escape to. Unlike the late Sigrid Talbot, Tanner would have no one looking for him.

Tanner climbed into a jeep and began breaking down the rifle he'd used. In the driver's seat, Sara turned to look at him as she placed the vehicle in gear.

"Mission accomplished?"

Tanner sent her a nod. The two of them drove off together while knowing that there was a little less evil in the world.

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BLUE STEELE – DADDY'S GIRL - Book 7 & the Series Finale of the Blue Steele Series

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ENSENADA, MEXICO 2:17 a.m.

I flew down a flight of wooden steps while blinking away the blood that ran into my left eye.

The woman I had tracked for over a week was about to lock herself inside a safe room. If the room also contained a hidden exit, as some did, I would lose her, possibly forever.

When I was six steps from the bottom I spotted my target as she moved toward a room with an open metal door. The cartel leader Juan Graboro was with her and Mia was urging the panting man forward.

"Hurry, Juan!"

The target, Mia Ortiz, couldn't see me, but she knew I was on her heels. As she and Graboro entered the room I dived off the steps to land hard atop a tile floor. The impact was jarring, but my momentum was enough to send me sliding through the still open doorway.

I hit Graboro hard from behind and sent him stumbling forward toward a cinder block wall. His head smacked hard against the unyielding surface and he fell to the floor, unconscious.

Mia had been slamming the door shut. Once it was closed, I heard a snapping sound as the magnetic locks engaged.

Mia swung her shotgun around as I did the same. Seeing that I had her in my sights, she took a step backward, tripped over Graboro's outstretched foot and fell on her ass.

We were seated directly across from each other with only twelve feet between us while aiming shotguns at each other.

Mia smiled. It was a beautiful smile from a beautiful woman. She had long dark hair, bronze-colored skin, and eyes that danced with mischief.

"What do they call you?" Mia asked.

I flicked my gaze toward Graboro for an instant. A lump was rising on his forehead and his mouth was slack. His exertion while running caused him to breathe hard. Despite the rapid rising and falling of his chest, Juan Graboro was definitely unconscious.

"I'm Blue Steele," I told Mia.

"You've been chasing me, Blue Steele. How do you like having

caught me?"

"I don't suppose that shotgun is unloaded?"

Mia laughed. "No more than yours is. Back in the day they called this a Mexican stand-off. Well, at least one of us is Mexican."

A sound penetrated the thick steel door that sounded like an explosion. Outside, on the grounds of the villa, a battle raged between a joint DEA/Policia Federal task force and the minions of Juan Graboro's cartel. When I ventured inside Graboro's home to search for Mia the task force still had a fighting chance, although they were outnumbered.

"Hey, Blue Steele, when my people come through that door you'll be a dead woman. Why not put down that shotgun? I'll let you live."

"Your people would still kill me."

"There are slow ways to die and quick ways to die. Besides, you're a beautiful woman. I could keep the men from… using you."

"My people will come through that door first, Mia. I won't have to keep them from raping you. The thought would never enter their minds."

Mia sighed. "It's going to be a long night, Blue Steele."

I said nothing, and the small room grew silent. I was pointing my shotgun at Mia, and Mia aimed her shotgun back my way. I hoped she wasn't foolish enough to pull the trigger, and I assumed she was wishing the same about me.

It was a stand-off, and it would be decided by the groups fighting outside the safe room.

If the cartel members won the battle I was a dead woman. If the task force members won, Mia was going to prison for life.

"Hey," Mia said.

"Yeah?"

"Why did your people send a chica like you after me?"

"Probably for the same reason that your people use you as an enforcer."

Mia grinned. "I track down people and make them sorry they ever crossed the cartel. You do the same for your cartel, eh?"

"I don't work for a cartel. I work for the United States government."

Mia laughed, and as she did so, she shifted her gaze momentarily to take in Graboro.

"Blue Steele, the United States government is the biggest cartel of all."

I didn't respond to that. I wasn't going to allow her to bait me into a political debate.

Mia matched my silence, time passed, and the shotgun in my hands grew heavier. I groaned internally as I pondered my situation.

How did I wind up here?

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FORT WORTH, TEXAS, FOUR DAYS EARLIER

SITTING on my back porch as dawn blossomed, I looked around at my surroundings and slowly shook my head in wonder.

I was happier than I could ever remember being and all my dreams had come true. I had a loving husband, a beautiful baby, and was the proud owner of a horse ranch.

Our horses once numbered only two, a quarter horse named Willow, which I rode, while my husband Ramón preferred to ride an Arabian named Midnight. We now had over a dozen horses. We had bought Midnight and Willow from a pair of elderly friends named John and Candace Miller. They had been the owners of a farm that bordered our property.

About a year ago, John passed away from a heart attack; a few months later, Candace Miller was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Her illness convinced her to consider selling her home and moving to Austin, where her daughter's family lived. She did so, and Ramón and I bought the farm.

We're in the process of converting it into a horse ranch. A dream I'd had for most of my life had come true and I owned a ranch where I could raise quarter horses. I also had four employees, huge veterinarian and feed bills, along with one heck of a mortgage, but no one said that dreams come true for free.

Despite all this, I felt incomplete at times, but at least I knew what was causing it. I had not worked in months due to my pregnancy and regardless of all the other exceptional joys in my life I missed being on the hunt.

My specialty was tracking down dangerous fugitives and other violent criminals on the run. Going up against such people was an activity filled with peril and challenges, where at times I was forced to the limit of my abilities. After months of domestic bliss and tranquilness I craved such a contest.

At first, I denied it, thinking it to be a perverse desire. I had everything I'd ever wanted, so why risk losing it all, risk losing my life, by tangling with some desperate soul who didn't care if they killed me or not?

But then, I remembered something my daddy once told me as a child when I asked him why he was a lawman. He said that he was different from other people, and that I was different from others as well. Even at a young age I had shown a willingness to fight instead of run, to stand up for what was right. As a Texas Ranger, my father had also been a hunter of criminals. He had undergone extensive training, yes, but it was his heroic soul that led him to do what he did. He had placed his life on the line to protect those who were ill-equipped to do the same. I lived each day of my life holding up that man as an example of how to live a good life. I hope I've done well.

I could stop chasing dangerous fugitives, but I can't stop being who I am. As full and joyous as my life had become, a part of me would be miserable if I quit doing what I loved to do.

I had been a bounty hunter for years. While I no longer collected bounties, I would always be a hunter.

Word had come the night before that my skills were needed once more. Soon, I would be back on the hunt.

~

WHILE RAMÓN WAS OPENING the front door to let Thomas Lawson into our home, I was settling our sleeping daughter into her crib.

We'd spent weeks thinking we were going to name our child after me. We were going to name her Azure Acero, which in Spanish meant, Blue Steel. After we both came to the conclusion that it was a bit too cutesy, we agreed to name her after a woman who meant a lot to me.

Our daughter was named after my mentor, the woman who trained me to be a bounty hunter, Ruby Wheeler.

My little Ruby cooed in her sleep as I laid her down. She was three months old and the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She favored me more than she did Ramón, but she had her daddy's darker skin coloration to go along with my green eyes.

After kissing my precious baby, I went downstairs and found that Lawson was looking at Ruby by way of our video baby monitor.

I greeted Lawson with a kiss on the cheek and he sent me a wide smile.

"That is one beautiful baby, Blue."

"Thank you. We named her Ruby."

"I like that name," Lawson said.

"I'll let you two talk in private," Ramón said. "Besides, I need to see to our horses."

Lawson and I settled together on a sofa in my living room and he removed a file from his briefcase.

"First, let me apologize for putting you back to work so soon. I

wouldn't do it if I didn't need your expertise."

"There's no need to apologize. After all, my maternity leave technically ended weeks ago."

"I know, but I was hoping to give you a bit more time. I'll say this, you appear to be in good shape."

I smiled. "Are you checking out my figure, Thomas?"

"Solely in the interest of your health and welfare. If you weren't in shape I wouldn't put you back in the field."

"I'm fit all right. I made sure I was. I would never risk myself on an assignment because I was too lazy to work out. I have much to live for." After speaking I looked over at the baby monitor. Ruby was sleeping like an angel.

Lawson removed a picture from the file and passed it over to me. It was the photo of a young, good-looking woman. Her skin was brown, and she had Hispanic features.

"That's Mia Ortiz," Lawson said.

"What is she on the run for?"

"Mia Ortiz is an enforcer for a Mexican cartel. If someone breaks the cartel's rules and goes on the run, it's Mia they send to track them down."

"Track them down and kill them?"

"Exactly."

"Who did she kill that brought her to your attention?"

"Mia murdered an undercover DEA agent named Ruben Corteron. Agent Corteron also happened to be the nephew of the former Governor of the Mexican state, Veracruz. The agent was born in Mexico and came here when he was a teen. He was exceptionally good at his job, but he was framed for a theft by a rival in the cartel he was investigating. Corteron killed the men sent to question him, then, fearing his cover had been blown he fled back here to the states."

"He headed back here on his own? What about his handlers?"

"Not knowing how he had been compromised, Agent Corteron decided to trust no one until he had more information. He finally made contact with a superior after crossing the border in San Diego, but he was murdered in a restaurant bar while awaiting pick-up."

"This woman, Mia, he must have thought she was harmless and dropped his guard."

"Yes, the cartel leader, Juan Graboro, he sent Mia off to make an example of Corteron. Agent Corteron died from ingesting poison that had been slipped into his drink."

"Does the cartel suspect he was a DEA agent?"

"They must know by now. We've learned that the man who started all this by framing Agent Corteron was tortured and killed."

"Is Mia still in the San Diego area?"

“That’s unknown, but it might be the best place to start.”

“Okay, but if she’s fled into Mexico, what then?”

“The United States and Mexico have formed a joint task force to take down Juan Graboro. They’re gathered in Tijuana while plans are being solidified. They’ll soon be making a move on the cartel leader’s compound. Graboro has a home on a beach in Ensenada, Mexico.”

I was surprised by where I assumed Lawson was heading.

“You want me to join the task force? I thought you liked me to operate under the radar?”

“You’ll accompany the task force as an observer only as a last resort. You have two days on your own to locate Mia, but I fear she’s crossed the border.”

Lawson went on to fill me in about the progress the FBI and DEA made in tracking Mia’s movements. It wasn’t much, but I saw a possibility that might be more than it seemed.

“I take it you need me to leave right away?”

Lawson looked over at the monitor and smiled at Ruby’s angelic image.

“First thing in the morning will be fine. Mia Ortiz either made it out of San Diego or she’s in hiding. If she’s still in hiding, she won’t make a move until the border security slackens off.”

“If she’s in hiding, I’ll find her,” I said.

Lawson smiled at me.

“No one is better at it than you, Blue. It’s good to have you back.”

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LAWSON ARRANGED to have a small jet on standby at the airport for me and I flew out of Fort Worth just before seven a.m.

During the flight I looked over the file on Mia Ortiz again, hoping to find something I missed earlier. The truth was, there wasn't much in the file. It was a list of assassinations that the DEA and FBI suspected her of committing, along with the methods she used to kill. While Agent Corteron had been murdered with poison, Mia normally used a shotgun. There was also an instance where she beat a man bloody with a baseball bat, then set him on fire. That man had raped the eight-year-old daughter of a cartel member.

Not only had Mia killed often, but she was a skilled tracker and hunter. It appeared she was often called in when someone went on the run. If Mia Ortiz had a personal life, she kept it hidden.

After landing, I acquired a rental car, then drove into the city. There was no point in indiscriminately showing Mia's photo around at bars and restaurants. The FBI and the local police would have done that already. I only had one lead to check out that I thought should have been given more attention.

It was a hostel whose owner was known to have been a cartel member in his youth. The DEA had put the place under surveillance for three days. When there was no sign of Mia, they moved on. However, the report stated that the surveillance was only performed externally.

In my opinion, they should have sent in an undercover agent. Had Mia been staying there at the time, she certainly wouldn't have been foolish enough to be seen outside the hostel.

To make matters worse, after a fight broke out between four young men in front of a nearby bar after midnight, someone called the police. This happened a day after the FBI ended their surveillance. If Mia had been inside the hostel, the sight and sound of two police cars arriving in the area would have sent her scrambling out a window.

The cops didn't enter the hostel. There was no need to do so. They just dragged the four drunken fools away from the bar, but the damage would have been done and Mia would be in the wind.

However, if she was there at the time and unaware of the police activity that transpired nearby, perhaps because she was asleep, she

might still be there. If that were the case, she would be mine.

~

I HAD PACKED along a pair of my oldest jeans and a Dallas Cowboys' T-shirt I'd had since high school. Both had seen their share of wear and tear and would help me blend in as someone looking to economize by staying at a hostel.

To enhance the look, I ditched my handbag and bought an old backpack at a second-hand store. It was perfect, as it was covered with decals and stickers from cities around the world. At first glance, people would take me as a vagabond.

While we were both far from old, neither myself nor Mia Ortiz could pass for college students. Fortunately, the average age of a guest staying at a hostel had gone up over the last decade or so, with senior citizens leading the charge. Some hostels did enforce age restrictions, but they were in the minority.

I sat in a coffee shop across the street from the hostel I would be staying at and watched the place for a while. The guests who were coming and going looked normal enough and I saw nothing that jumped out at me.

I had called ahead and knew they had vacancies. After getting my look at the place I walked over and checked-in. As much as I would have liked a private room, I opted instead for a twin room. That meant that I would be sharing accommodations with another guest.

The girl who checked me in said that my roommate's name was Megan, and I was pleased to hear that Megan was a long-term guest.

~

SHE MAY HAVE BEEN a long-term guest, but Megan turned out to be only nineteen. A petite brunette, she was originally from Delaware, but she traveled to San Diego with a boyfriend who had a try-out with a local professional sports team. When the boyfriend failed to make the cut, he decided to go back home and sell cars at his father's dealership.

Megan wished him well, but she had fallen in love with San Diego and decided to stay. She worked odd jobs while looking for something more permanent.

I ingratiated myself to her when I offered to treat her to a dinner of Chinese take-out, and she reciprocated by supplying soda to wash it down with.

Once we were comfortable with each other I asked her about the other guests. I had a picture of Mia that I could show her, but I

refrained from doing so. She might think it odd if I began questioning her about a certain person, and so I kept things casual.

Megan was a gossip. When the subject of the conversation turned to the hostel's owner, Pablo, a smile came over Megan's face.

"Why the grin?" I asked.

"Pablo, he's not much to look at, but you should have seen that secret lover of his."

"A secret lover?"

Megan nodded.

"Um-hmm, he doesn't know I saw her, but I was sitting at the top of the stairs one day after I'd broken a heel. When Pablo opened his door, I saw a woman's reflection in a mirror."

"Did she see you?"

"No, she was staring at the door, but oh man was she beautiful. You know, she looked a little like you, but exotic, and with darker skin. I think she must be married or something, or maybe on the run from the cops."

I forced a laugh.

"Why would you think that?"

"She never left his room, not once, but I think she's gone now. Pablo doesn't bring food to his room anymore."

I changed the subject so that I didn't seem to be too interested in Pablo. A short time later, I was on the phone with Lawson.

~

"EXCELLENT WORK, Blue, but do you think Ortiz is still there?"

"I would doubt it, but Pablo might know where she's gone."

"I'll send a team in tomorrow morning to raid the place. You might want to be somewhere else."

"Okay, but one more thing."

"Yes?"

"The woman I got the information from, Megan. She's young and might not be wise enough to keep what she knows to herself. I'm not talking witness protection or anything that involved, but is there some way you could move her to a safer place."

"Does she have family nearby?"

"No, and she wants to settle in San Diego, but she can't find full-time employment."

"I'll arrange for her to receive a job offer from a government agency. As for the hostel, we'll likely be shutting it down for harboring criminals. Your informant should be safe."

"You're the best, Lawson. I'll check back in tomorrow."

~

THE RAID FAILED to turn up Mia, but it did uncover evidence that she had stayed there. A photo was found in Pablo's room.

It had fallen off a night stand and was between the table and the wall. It was a photo of Mia holding a child that was about a year old. The little girl resembled her, but the child had much lighter skin. Perhaps Mia had a personal life after all.

Other than the photo and a few fingerprints, there was no trace of Mia. Pablo refused to talk, and I seemed to have reached a dead-end. It was time to contact the task force and hitch a ride into Mexico.

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DEA AGENT RONALD CONNORS was not happy to see me and furious that yet another person had been informed about the upcoming raid on Graboro's villa. I met with him and a second agent named Del Richards inside a conference room.

I was seated on one side of a long table while the men stood together on the opposite side.

Connors looked at me with an expression that displayed his annoyance. Agent Richards' stare was different. He was checking me out as if I had arrived for a blind date. Judging by his suit, the styled hair, and the cologne, I guessed that he thought of himself as a ladies' man. He was tall, dark, and handsome, but I had already found Mr. Right.

"What agency are you with again?" Connors asked.

"I work under the authority of Homeland Security, Agent Connors, and I have no intention of interfering with your raid. I simply want to tag along so that I can apprehend a cartel assassin who murdered one of your DEA agents."

That got his attention.

"Are you talking about the bitch who killed Ruben Corteron?"

"You knew him?

"He was a friend. That female assassin, Mia Ortiz, you believe she might be inside Graboro's villa?"

"Possibly, or she may have already moved on. That's what I need to find out. Your raiding party would be my ticket into Graboro's compound."

"What happens when you apprehend her?"

"I'll hand her over. What else?"

Agent Connors crossed his arms over his massive chest. He was a big man, muscular, with sandy-blond hair and gray eyes. The gray eyes were full of suspicion.

"I was wondering if your orders were to secure Mia Ortiz and bring her in, so she could be placed in protective custody. Someone like her might be a wealth of intelligence. She wouldn't be the first dirt bag offered an immunity from prosecution deal for ratting out her friends."

"Those are not my orders. If I do find Ortiz at the compound I will

hand her over to you."

"Or, I could leave you behind and my people and I find her for ourselves."

"Aw, let her come along, Ron. I'll look after her," Richards said.

Connors rolled his eyes.

"She's married, Del. Don't you see the ring on her finger?"

Richards looked over Connors' shoulder, took in my left hand, and frowned.

"Crap, well then, do what you want, Ron, and I'll see you around."

Connors and I watched Richards leave. Once the door had closed, Connors sat across from me.

"Why should I let you come along?"

"I was called in because the FBI and the DEA couldn't locate Mia. I was on the job for only a few hours when I verified that she'd been staying at a hostel in San Diego that had previously been under surveillance. Listen, Agent Connors, I won't get in your way, and another pair of eyes and a gun might not be a bad thing on a dangerous mission like this."

"It shouldn't be dangerous. We're going in there with a small army. I expect Graboro won't know what hit him."

"So much the better," I said.

Connors stared at me for several moments before sending me a curt nod.

"I'll allow you to join us, but I have a condition."

"Yes?"

"You'll have to learn our mission protocols and be brought up to speed on our tactics. I don't want you wandering around blind while inside the compound. That said, you will not in any way, shape, or form be a member of the task force. If you interfere with my mission I will cuff you and tuck you in a dark corner."

I smiled.

"I won't need any time-outs. All I'm interested in is finding Mia Ortiz and bringing her to justice."

"Justice for her would be a bullet to the head," Connors said.

I stared into his eyes.

"If it comes to that, I won't hesitate."

~

THE FOLLOWING DAY was spent learning what I needed to know to become an unofficial member of the task force.

Connors was pleased to learn that I spoke Spanish, although I wasn't as fluent as the other agents. That meant that I could communicate with our colleagues from Mexico, the Policia Federal

agents. They all spoke English, but it was still good that everyone could converse in both languages.

I was impressed by the planning that had gone into the raid. Connors seemed to be taking no chances. Despite being eager to take down Graboro, if the agents sent in to scout the compound reported anything amiss, the mission would be scrubbed.

An hour before we were set to move in, the latest satellite surveillance images were processed. They revealed that less than a dozen hostiles were inside the compound. I was hoping that one of those bodies showing up on the thermal imaging scans was my target, Mia Ortiz.

~

AT LAST, the moment arrived. Graboro's compound faced the ocean. At one end of the property a guard stood near a wooden gate built beside a rock wall. That wall bordered a stable where Graboro kept several horses.

Juan Graboro loved to ride on the beach at sunset with his wife. It seemed the cartel leader was also a romantic. Intelligence revealed that the wife was away visiting family, which was a break for the task force. Had she been on the premises, the people Graboro sent along to guard his wife would have been in the compound, increasing the number of hostiles the task force would have faced.

One of the agents sent to scout ahead reported that everything looked as they'd hope it would. Connors gave the man the green light to take down the man guarding the gate that allowed access to the beach.

Once the gate was open, I rode with Connors onto the grounds of the compound inside a jeep.

Some of the men had night-vision equipment, but it was hardly needed because of the full moon overhead.

As everyone left their vehicles, I found myself falling behind. I was in shape, but most of the men were faster than me and I was soon at the rear with three men and another woman agent. Right before you reached the estate there was a dip in the sandy terrain. The group I was running with moved down that slope, which took us momentarily out of sight of the shoreline. That quirk in the landscape may have saved our lives.

The beach led to a huge elaborate garden area, beyond which lay the walls of the villa. As the agents ahead of us sped up the beach on an incline and into the garden, gunfire came from behind. From the cacophony of the sounds I knew there were hundreds of rounds being fired at once.

The rounds flew over my head as I ducked down. They were intended for the men nearing the villa's walls. The bullets struck their targets and brave men died.

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I MOVED in a crouch with my head down until I reached the end of the sandy trench I was in. When I was no longer concealed from the men charging up the beach I dove for cover behind a stone wall that was no more than waist high.

Automatic fire raked the spot I had just vacated. A round wounded one of the agents I'd been running with, but he made it to fresh cover and lay panting.

Officially, I was along for the raid as an observer, courtesy of a joint DEA/Policia Federal task force. Unofficially, I was just another target caught in what was looking like a major screw-up.

The task force was comprised of forty-two agents, of which thirty-eight were directly involved in the raid.

Intelligence reports revealed that they would be facing eleven hostiles as they moved in to arrest the cartel leader they were after.

In reality, they were outgunned. A group of over fifty armed men emerged from the surf behind us, having moved in silently aboard large skiffs powered by paddles. Somewhere out in the ocean was the mother ship they had arrived on. I prayed that it had no more men to send against us.

"We've walked into a trap!" shouted Agent Connors. Connors had allowed me to come along on the raid, but only once I promised not to get involved.

I was going to break that promise.

At least a third of Connor's people went down when the men from the beach opened up on us. The rest of them had managed to scramble behind the stone walls of the villa's decorative garden as I had, but they had yet to breach the villa's gate. That meant that we had men both in front of us and behind us. It meant that we would soon be dead.

I crawled along in the grass at the base of the low wall until I was beside Agent Connors and several other agents.

"Connors," I said. "I need you to give me a boost up. I'm going over the wall."

Agent Connors looked up at the ten-foot stone wall, then back at me.

"That's suicide. There could be men on the other side waiting to

shoot anything that comes over that wall."

"You're right. That's why I'll need a shotgun. I'll be firing off shells the moment I make it over the wall."

"That's crazy."

"No, doing nothing is crazy. If we don't get beyond the walls, we'll all die out here. Someone has to open that gate."

A man on my right let out a shrill scream as two rounds tore into his throat. He was one of the Mexican agents. Connors and I crawled over to the man, but he had suffered severe wounds and was dying. I don't think he even knew we were there. As he died, Connors spoke to him soothingly in Spanish.

The next few minutes were spent in giving return fire and seeking shelter closer to the wall, where large granite statues gave us cover.

I grabbed Connor's arm.

"I need you to give me your shotgun and any spare shells you have. I'll need them when I go over the wall."

Connors moaned as a pained expression came over him.

"Damn it, Steele. I'm sorry I brought you along on this. I may have gotten you killed."

"Don't be sorry. We still have a chance. But someone has to get over this wall and open those gates."

"I'll do it."

I smiled. Connors was in shape, but he was way too big and heavy to make it over the wall quickly. If he attempted to climb over he'd be shot before he reached the top.

"How much do you weigh?"

"About two-twenty."

"And you're strong, right?"

"Yeah."

"You're going to toss me over that wall. I'll get a running start, step up onto your linked hands, and then you're going to throw me as high as you can. My guess is I'll never touch the wall."

Connors thought over my plan.

"You're going to have a hard landing on the other side."

"Probably, but I'll be prepared for it. Anyway, my sister Jenny and I used to jump off the barn roof when we were kids. It was higher than that wall."

"I bet you landed in straw back then."

"True, but I'm also no longer a little girl."

Another agent went down, but his injury was such that he rejoined the fight. Still, it was just a matter of time before we were overrun and slaughtered.

"Connors? I can do it."

"Okay," he said. "We'll do it."

After Connors handed me his shotgun, I gave him my weapon, with a spare magazine. Along with the five shells in the Mossberg, he passed me two loose shells. He then reached in a pack on his waist and came out with something that made me smile.

"That's a night-vision monocular."

"Yes," Connors said. "Along with a head strap. I know we've got a full moon, but the clouds could move in at any moment, take it."

We were forced to return fire and change position again. It placed us even closer to the villa wall, but we lost yet another agent to a shoulder wound.

I latched the monocular onto my belt by its head strap. There was no time to put it on and adjust it. I needed to get over that wall.

Connors explained the plan to several of his men, then we moved behind another row of statues while taking fire. Neither of us was hit, but granite chips stung both of us and opened up small cuts.

After going over the plan once more, I made my move as several Mexican agents drew most of the enemy's fire. They were fierce, skilled, and they took down several of the cartel members.

"Now!" I said to Connors, then watched him link his hands together.

I ran at him, stepped up onto his hands, and felt him propel me toward the sky.

It worked. I was above the wall, at the apex of my leap, and looking down at the other side. There were no men there. No guns.

I had been ready to blast away with the shotgun at anything I saw, but there was nothing. I landed hard atop grass, feeling the stress in my knees and a sharp pain in my right ankle. Crouching, I scurried behind a tree. Once there, I decided to put on the night-vision monocular. As I unlatched it from my belt, I froze, as I sensed danger approaching.

I heard them coming before I saw them. Two dogs. Big dogs. Huge dogs.

Rottweilers! said a part of my brain, while the rest of it screamed at me to run.

I didn't run. I aimed the shotgun at the charging hounds and prepared to fire. I didn't want to kill the dogs. I loved dogs, but I also didn't want to become their chew toy.

As my finger tightened on the trigger, the pair split up. They had been headed right at me, but now they approached from both the right and the left.

I would only have time to shoot one of them. Someone had trained them well. It didn't matter which one I killed. Either way, I was about to die.

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INSIDE THE SAFE room of Juan Graboro's villa, I eased my right leg straight out in front of me as I sat atop the concrete floor.

The leap over the wall had caused my knees to ache and I still felt a twinge of discomfort in the right one. I held the shotgun steady in my hands and looked across the room where Mia was aiming her own shotgun at me.

If I fired, she would likely die or become too incapacitated to fire back at me. *Likely*, being the key word in that sentence. I wasn't ready to risk my life on a likely… at least, not yet.

"Were you the woman I saw firing at the gate guards?" Mia asked.

"I came in over the wall."

"Juan has dogs roaming the grounds," Mia said. "How did you get past them?"

"I charmed them," I said.

That brought a smile to Mia's lips.

"I think it more likely that you used that shotgun on them. It makes me wonder how many shells you have left."

"I'll only need one," I said.

"Not after Juan's men open that door. When that happens, Blue Steele, I could be your only friend."

"We're not friends, Mia. I would trust those trained attack dogs before I would rely on a woman like you to show mercy."

"A woman like me? And just what sort of woman would that be?"

"You're a heartless killer who cares only about money."

"Money is nice, but I have other interests."

"Is Graboro one of them? I noticed that you called him by his first name. That's seems overly familiar for a hired gun."

"Juan is too old for me and he is devoted to his wife. I call him Juan because I've known him since I was a child, back then, he was Uncle Juan."

I cocked my head at that revelation.

"Are you related somehow?"

"He and my father were friends as children, but Juan had more ambition and went on to run the cartel."

"That ambition will see him spend the rest of his life behind bars."

"I wouldn't count on that."

“You speak English like a native. Who taught you?”

“I grew up in a tourist town that many rich Americans and Europeans visited. My father also spoke English.”

“What about your mother?”

“She died young.”

Mia studied me again as two worry lines appeared between her eyebrows.

“Juan’s dogs are exceptional. I know this because I watched them train once when I was here last year,” Mia said. “Even if you killed one, the other dog should have ripped your throat out. How did you survive them?”

“I had help.”

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THE SOUND of a gun firing came from high and to the right of me. It was close and distinct from all the other weapons going off beyond the wall. I had fired at the Rottweiler charging at me on my left side and missed high, as the unexpected shot had startled me. The dog was rocketing toward me, growing larger and more menacing, and I could see the saliva dripping from its mouth and hear its breath. I was out of time.

The dog let out a yelp just as it leapt at me, then changed direction in midair, to slide to the grass beside me. When I swiveled to shoot the dog on my right, I saw that it was already down, although it was alive and panting, as was the dog at my side.

Agent Connors dropped from the wall and limped toward me. He had been shot on the side of his right leg. A round that was no doubt sustained while he risked climbing the wall to help me. Blood was flowing from the wound and turning his pant leg red.

We scanned our surroundings to see if our shots had gained us attention. They hadn't. The noise must have blended in with the firefight still raging on the other side of the wall.

"Are you injured, Steele?"

"I'm good, thanks to you." Connors looked down at one of the dogs he had shot. I saw that he was crying and placed a hand on his arm. "How bad is your wound?"

"Not as bad as it looks, I'll live. I'm just sick about having to shoot these dogs. I love dogs, and I've got two German shepherds at home."

"Don't feel too bad, you saved my life."

Connors wiped at his tears, then pointed toward the house. "Oh no."

I looked to where he was gesturing and saw several men with rifles headed toward the gate. One of them carried a massive weapon that appeared to be heavy.

"That's a handheld M2," Connors said. "It fires .50 rounds. That will pierce the stone walls our people are using for cover like they weren't even there."

"We'll stop them," I said, "but there's good news as well. It looks like they have to open the gate to use that thing. Once they unlock the gate we'll make our move."

Connors nodded in agreement as a look of pain caused him to moan.

"You don't look well, Connors. Do you feel like you'll pass out?"

"I'm good, Steele. Nothing is going to keep me from letting our people inside the gate. Once we do that, we can keep Graboro's street soldiers at bay on the beach until reinforcements arrive."

"Okay then," I said. "I'll circle around and come up on their right, you take the left."

"Shoot the man with the M2 first. We can't let that thing start spitting death at our people."

"I understand," I said, then sprinted away with the shotgun to get into position.

~

THERE WERE three other men beside the one wielding the M2. Their weapons were formidable as well, as each had an AR-15 with a 100-round drum attached. Their intent was clear. They were seeking to get the federal agents in a pincer movement between themselves and the cartel soldiers on the beach. If that happened, the fight would be over in minutes.

Two of the men slung their rifles across their backs so that they could unlock and open the massive metal gate of the compound.

After getting closer and finding cover behind a stone bench, I waited, as Connors did the same. When the gate opened a crack, I fired at the man holding the M2.

The shotgun pellets shredded the man's knees even as rounds from Connors' gun struck the man in the side. My next shot caught a man in the stomach, while the men who had been opening the gate fumbled for their guns.

They fell while still grappling with their weapons, as Connors and I pelted them with well-placed rounds. As the men lay dead or dying, one of the federal agents entered the gate, followed by another, then still more.

"Over here!" Connors called out.

I loaded my last two shells as I headed toward the gate, and movement coming from inside the home caught my attention. There was a huge window set above the wide doors of the villa. It allowed a view of an unlit crystal chandelier hanging above the foyer.

Looking beyond the chandelier, I could see two figures running down a staircase. One male, one female.

They were too far away to make out details until they reached the wide landing of the marble staircase, where a lit lamp sat on an ornate table. The man was Juan Graboro, the cartel leader, while the woman

was Mia Ortiz. Mia carried a shotgun in her hands, while a pistol was bouncing in a holster on her left hip.

I shouted to Connors even as I was sprinting toward the house.

“Graboro and Ortiz are inside the villa!”

I don’t know if Connors heard me or not. My focus was on getting to Mia. The front door had been left unlocked by the men who had headed to the gate. That stroke of luck gave me the time I needed to see which direction Mia and Graboro had taken after leaving the staircase.

They had gone right, past a room teeming with artwork, then down a corridor that led to the rear of the home. The hallway was wide and contained more treasures in the form of antique furniture and pottery.

I followed. My shotgun was at the ready and I was prepared to dive to the floor if needed. No shots came my way, although I was certain that Mia must have heard my footfalls behind her.

Without breaking stride, she cleared the gun from her hip holster and began taking wild shots while running sideways. I dove to the floor behind a huge oak table with massive carved legs and avoided the rounds.

Mia and Graboro were headed somewhere in a great hurry and I began to understand when they opened a door to go down a wooden staircase.

A safe room. I thought. *There must be a safe room in the basement.*

Graboro was in the lead. He began the descent, but Mia surprised me again by pretending to follow him, then popping back into sight.

She fired several hurried rounds at me. I figured her goal was to slow me down and make me think twice about following them, since she didn’t appear to take aim. I dived to the floor as a bullet hit the wall just in front of and above me, sending a chunk of plaster at my face that opened a cut on my forehead over my left eye.

I leapt up and resumed running while firing a blast from the shotgun, leaving me only one shell left. The shotgun pellets took a chunk out of the bottom section of the basement door Mia had been standing behind. I sought to wound her by firing so low, but the woman had already started down the stairs.

I rounded the corner with the shotgun leading the way and saw the steep staircase. Mia and Graboro were nowhere in sight, but as I started down the stairs I heard the sound of magnetic locks disengaging, then the creak of hinges.

When I was several steps from the bottom, I spotted Mia as she moved past an open metal door with Juan Graboro.

Mia couldn’t see me with her back turned, but she knew I was on her heels. She must have feared being shot in the back at any moment.

The thought did cross my mind, but I wanted her alive. I wanted her to sit locked away in a cell during the best years of her life as punishment for killing Agent Corteron.

I dived off the steps, landed hard atop a tile floor, and slid through the open doorway, where I found myself entering a stand-off that might end with my death.

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“HEY, Blue Steele, how did you become a Fed?”

“My father was a Texas Ranger. In a way, I’ve followed in his footsteps.”

Mia looked delighted by my answer.

“Ah, a daddy’s girl, eh? I guess you could call me that too. My father was also an enforcer of cartel rules.”

“My father didn’t enforce rules, he enforced laws.”

“Whatever, he was still a man who did the bidding of others, just like my father.”

I knew that I shouldn’t let Mia get under my skin, but nobody gets away with putting down my daddy.

“My father wasn’t anything like your father. He wasn’t a lackey to the boss of a criminal empire. He was a sworn officer of the law.”

“You speak of him in the past.”

“He died while performing his duty.”

“My papa is dead as well, and it was because of something he did while performing his duty.”

“Somehow, I doubt it was the same thing,” I said.

Mia smiled, but stopped trying to goad me. As the minutes ticked by, I remembered the day my father explained to me what it was he did for a living.

~

LANDSVILLE, TEXAS, 1993

I WAS JUST a little thing when my daddy got wounded in the line of duty.

His regular partner, Deke Thomas, had been off that day to attend a family wedding, and Daddy had been partnered up with a Texas Ranger named Pete Douglas. I knew him as Uncle Pete, because he and Daddy often hunted together.

Five men robbed a bank in Fort Worth. They killed a bank teller, and two civilians outside the bank. The civilians had been run down by the getaway driver. They had been a young mother and her two-year-old boy.

Daddy and Pete went in pursuit. As Daddy drove, Pete leaned out his window and fired at the getaway car's rear tires. It took six rounds, but he managed to flatten a tire and the car skidded into a ditch. Daddy and Pete planned to hunker down behind their vehicle until reinforcements arrived, but the bank robbers had another idea.

They wanted my father's cruiser. With their own car disabled it was their only chance to get away before more officers arrived. The men had shotguns. They advanced on my father's position while firing. Daddy took out one of the men as Pete killed another, but then Pete took a fatal round while wounding one of the men in the leg.

That left my daddy facing three men alone. He scrambled beneath the cruiser with his own shotgun in hand and began blasting at the men's ankles and calves. They went down screaming in agony, then took more rounds where they lay. Two of them survived after tossing away their weapons, but only after the third one had his head blown apart.

My father hadn't realized that he was wounded in the right side until after the adrenaline rush subsided. It wasn't a serious wound, but he had required surgery and was on medical leave for three weeks.

I learned these details much later. At the time, I only knew that my daddy had been hurt by some bad men. It scared me. Up until then, I had thought him indestructible.

To make matters worse, someone had been in the area of the bank at the time of the robbery and caught the robbers on film fleeing the bank.

I saw some of the video during a commercial break one morning as I was watching cartoons, as the station was touting their upcoming news program. The scene looked like chaos to my young mind. Gunshots were being fired in the air by the robbers and the people in the street dropped to the ground or ran away in a panic.

One day while he was home recovering, I asked Daddy why he went after the robbers instead of running away like everyone else did. He took me by my tiny hand and we went for a walk outside.

~

IT WAS a late spring day and the weather was warm and the grass green.

My parents owned the surrounding land, but rented it out to a neighboring farmer, who planted on it. The old man who rented the land back then had been named Simmons, and we could see Mr. Simmons riding his tractor across a field on our right. Along the fields to the left of us the cornstalks were just forming their silk. When the silk turned brown they would be ripe for harvest.

“Honey, Daddy didn’t run from those men because that’s not who I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well now, not everyone is the same. Your teacher teaches you and the other kids because it makes her happy to see children learn new things. Now take old man Simmons over there, if he was told he had to be your teacher from now on he wouldn’t have a clue how to teach you, and I bet your teacher has never done a lick of farming. They’re different people, but they each have something they’re good at.”

“Is that why you chased after the bad guys, because you’re good at it?”

My father stopped walking and knelt down beside me.

“Yes, honey. They don’t scare me the way they do most people. I’ve also been trained to deal with varmints like that bunch that robbed the bank.”

I touched his side lightly, where beneath his shirt he still wore a bandage over his wound.

“But the bad guys hurt you.”

“Yes, but I hurt them worse, and they won’t be robbing anymore banks.”

I smiled. “You’re a hero.”

My daddy laughed. “No, honey, I’m just a lawman doing his job.”

“What’s your job?”

“To keep people safe, honey. Daddy keeps people safe from the bad men. That’s why I don’t run. I can’t. I’m just not made that way.”

I hugged my father around the neck.

“I want to be like you when I grow up. I don’t want to be one of the people who run away.”

“You’re not a runner, baby, you’re a fighter.”

I released him and looked at him with surprise.

“I am?”

“You took on that boy who was picking on your sister last week, and girl, he was twice your size.”

I made a face. “Robby Cooper, he’s just a dumb bully.”

“Maybe so, but most of the boys in your school wouldn’t fight him, but you did.”

“I thought you and Mama were mad about me getting into a fight?”

“Now I didn’t say that you should get into fights, but you also shouldn’t take guff from anybody.”

“I don’t.”

“I know you don’t, honey, you got the family grit.”

I laughed. “What’s grit? It sounds like food.”

“It means you have guts, baby, and the bad guys better never mess

with you.”

I hugged him again. “I love you, Daddy.

“I love you too, baby, so very much.”

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THE CARTEL LEADER, Graboro, let out a moan. I gave it a few seconds before risking a flick of my eyes toward him to see if he had awakened. He hadn't, but likely would before long.

The shotgun was getting heavy in my hands. I had to keep my finger on the trigger as well, and it was beginning to feel a bit numb. Mia was in a similar position, but she looked calm and as relaxed as could be.

"You got kids?" Mia asked.

"A daughter."

"I'll make you a deal. Put down that shotgun and I'll make sure you get to see your daughter again."

"I'm not a fool, Mia. I know that I'll be killed if I'm captured."

Mia smiled.

"I could make sure you die easy, or I could tell the men to torture you."

I wondered about Mia then. The Mexican cartels were not known for their progressive attitude toward women.

"How did you become an assassin for the Graboro cartel?" I asked.

"I followed in my papa's footsteps. After my mama died, papa took me everywhere with him. He was proud of what he did for a living. He was feared by many and respected by all. There are worse ways for a man to live. I figured why not a woman too."

"How old were you when you killed your first man?"

Mia laughed.

"You are a nosy one, but I don't mind, it will help the time to pass quicker. I killed a man when I was only thirteen. He was a drunken pig who tried to rape me."

"That's self-defense, not murder. Killing someone because you were ordered to do so is another matter altogether."

"No one orders me around, Blue Steele. I am an independent assassin, and my own woman."

"You mean you're not just another cartel assassin like your father was? You get to choose your targets?"

"That's right, and just because my father worked for a cartel as a hired gun it did not make him weak or evil. My papa was a good man, Blue Steele, and one hell of a father."

~

MEXICO 1996

NINE-YEAR-OLD MIA ORTIZ smiled while marveling at the endless expanses of barren land she saw in every direction, as her father sped their car down a lonely two-lane highway.

Having grown up near Ensenada, Mia was more at home among the bustle of souvenir shops and foreign tourists. To see so much vast emptiness without a soul in sight was a new experience.

The little girl's smile was one of the few she'd had since her mother had passed away weeks earlier. Although she loved her father intensely, the loss of her mother had left a wound in her young heart.

As a consequence of having no one at home while he traveled about, Mia's father had taken to bringing her with him wherever he went, save for the times she was in school. Having always been close to her papa, Mia enjoyed the trips.

Her father slowed the car as they approached a gap in a row of trees, and Mia saw that there was a strip of dirt running westward that could be used as a road. It was a bumpy path. As they jounced along on it, Mia's father pretended to be jostled more than he was. He pantomimed having trouble holding onto the steering wheel as he bounced high in his seat.

Mia giggled at her father's antics and was pleased to see him acting like his old self again. She had not been the only one devastated by her mother's sudden death from an undiagnosed brain aneurysm.

Mia's father, Fernando, drove their vehicle several more miles before coming to a stop where the road ended at a large clearing.

At the rear of the area was a hill. The side of the hill had been scraped by a bulldozer and made into a flat vertical plane. Thick wooden posts were in front of the bluff and nailed onto them were painted targets in a bulls-eye pattern.

Mia's father had driven to the spot to try out a new weapon. It was a rifle he had someone modify so that it would fire on full auto.

Fernando shot at targets for over an hour with a series of handguns, then decided to take a break before trying out the new rifle. After loading the weapon so that it would be ready to go, Fernando extracted two sodas from an ice chest and passed one over to Mia. She was delighted, as she was rarely allowed to have sugar. This told her that her father considered the outing to be special, and that he wanted her to have a good time.

After their break, Fernando used a small pistol to teach Mia the basics of shooting, with much emphasis on safety. In fact, her gun wasn't even loaded.

“You’ll be given the opportunity to shoot once the proper handling of the gun becomes second nature to you,” her father told her.

As they were setting up a new target from a stack Mia’s father had brought with them, the sound of another vehicle bumping along the road reached them. It was a pickup truck with two men inside.

Mia’s father gestured for her to stay by their car while he went to talk to the men. Fernando carried the rifle, but he kept it pointed toward the ground.

The pickup truck slowed, then came to a stop about thirty feet from Fernando. When the two men stepped out of the truck, Fernando saw that they were carrying shotguns. One of the men smiled as he spoke to him.

“Great minds think alike. We have also come here to do some target practicing.”

“With shotguns?” Fernando said.

The man’s smile widened.

“They make it much easier to hit what you’re aiming at.”

“I would guess so,” Fernando said, while not liking the stranger’s smile. The other man wore no expression at all, but he kept staring at Fernando’s rifle.

Fernando reasoned that the men had followed the sounds of his earlier shots to locate him. They likely expected to find him holding a handgun, not a rifle with a thirty-round magazine. If they knew it could fire on full auto they might have snuck up on him, despite being two against one.

At the sound of Mia’s scream, Fernando shifted his gaze to include a view behind him, where a third man had crept up on them through the trees. He was taller than the other two, who were doubtless his accomplices. The fiend gripped Mia’s long hair with one hand, while his other hand was holding a knife to her throat.

The smiling man spoke again.

“Before you do anything stupid, my friend, I suggest you listen to me. We won’t hurt you if you give us your weapons and your car.”

Fernando tore his eyes away from his frightened daughter to stare at the man with venomous eyes.

“Tell your partner to release my daughter.”

The smile was back on the man’s face.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. We want the girl too. She’s worth a nice price in certain circles.” The smile became an evil grin. “I think I’ll break her in myself.”

Fernando brought up the untested rifle while already squeezing the trigger and stitched a line of rounds from himself to the two men with the shotguns. The smiling man’s stoic companion was struck in the right hip, stomach, and chest while further rounds shattered the teeth,

and the skull, of the smiling man.

Having emptied the rifle, Fernando released it and freed the pistol holstered on his hip.

“I’ll slit her throat!” the tall man shouted. The shout turned into a yelp of pain as Mia sunk her teeth deep into the flesh of his thumb.

With her mouth clamped onto his hand, the man was unable to use the blade on Mia’s throat, leaving Fernando the precious moment he needed to take careful aim.

The pistol cracked twice as shots sped toward their target, and the tall man was struck two times in the chest. Mia’s teeth had such a strong grip on his thumb that when he fell over she followed him to the ground.

Fernando rushed to her, and to his horror, he saw that his daughter was bleeding. While struggling to free his hand, the tall man’s knife had nicked her on the forehead.

“Are you all right, baby?”

Mia hugged her father as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I was so afraid, Papa.”

“Yes, but you acted bravely by biting that man.”

Mia spit on the ground.

“He was nasty, and he smelled like cigarettes and beer.”

After calming Mia, Fernando dragged the men’s bodies out of sight among the trees. After grabbing a first-aid kit from his glove box, Fernando went to work cleaning and bandaging the small cut Mia had received.

“We have to move their truck out of sight, then I have to find a phone and make a call,” Fernando said.

After completing both tasks, they waited by the phone booth Fernando had used, and spoke of what had occurred.

“Why did that man grab me, Papa?”

“Those were evil men. They wanted our things so that they could sell them.”

Mia’s eyes grew wide.

“They were going to sell me too? But why would anyone want to buy me? I’m too young to work and earn money.”

Fernando hugged his daughter to him.

“They were evil men who would have sold you to other evil men. You don’t need to know their reasons.”

“You killed them.”

“Yes, and I will kill anyone who ever threatens you.”

“After the man grabbed me, I was wishing I still had the gun you gave me. Even though it wasn’t loaded, seeing it would have made him let me go.”

“Guns have power. I will teach you to use them so that someday

you'll be able to protect yourself."

The men Fernando had called arrived in a truck that was towing a small backhoe loader. After checking to see that the area was undisturbed, they ventured to the spot where the shooting had occurred.

Mia watched as one of the men used the machine to dig a deep hole near the base of the sheer cliff. She then saw her father and the other man drag the bodies to the hole and toss them in. Once the dirt was filled in and the ground pressed flat by the weight of the machine's tires, it was as if the men had disappeared.

The ground had devoured the dead once again, as it had swallowed Mia's mother on the day of her mama's funeral. However, no prayers were offered at this gravesite, and none attending the burial would miss the dead in the least.

Fernando gave the shotguns and the pickup truck to his friends for helping him deal with the bodies. Afterward, he and Mia drove home in a somber mood, as questions danced within her young mind.

When they were stopped at a traffic light, Mia voiced what she was thinking.

"Why do you have so many guns, Papa?"

"They are part of my work."

"What is it you do? Mama told me you worked for Uncle Juan, but she would never say more than that."

"Juan Graboro is rich and has many enemies. I protect him from his enemies."

"The way you protected me back there?"

"Yes, Mia. That is what I do for a living. I make sure that men like that do not hurt your Uncle Juan."

"Isn't that what the police do?"

"Was there a policeman back there when that man held a knife to your throat?"

"No."

"That's because they have other things to do. The police are a business like any other, Mia. They make money by handing out tickets and taking bribes. Juan owns many policemen and he pays them to leave him be in peace."

"That's illegal."

"Yes, many things are, but if you're a strong person and not a sheep like most people you ignore the laws and the silly customs and rules. You have to make your own way in this world, Mia, not follow the crowd. The people who obey every law are the weak and the poor. They deserve what they get for their cowardice."

"I want to be strong like you, Papa. I don't want to be a sheep."

"You won't be, baby. I won't let you become one. Instead, you'll be

a wolf, like me."

A wolf? Mia thought, liking the image it evoked in her mind. *Yes, someday I'll be a wolf, just like Papa.*

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“IF YOU SURRENDERED to me and cooperated, you might be released in time to live out your old age as a free woman,” I told Mia.

She laughed again. “Your people would lock me away for life no matter what you say.”

“Maybe, or maybe you could put this life behind you someday and not have to take orders from Graboro.”

“I kill Juan Graboro’s enemies because his interest are my interests. Perhaps that changes soon. He’s getting old and I think one of the younger narcos will make a move on him.”

“Graboro will be in prison soon, so will you.”

“I will never go to prison.”

I decided to see if I could shock Mia.

“I’ve seen your daughter. She looks a lot like you, but her father must have light skin.”

Mia’s face grew stern.

“How the hell do you know what my daughter looks like?”

“You left a photo behind at the hostel in San Diego.”

Mia whispered a curse in Spanish.

“I had it out before the police cars showed up, then forgot to grab it.”

“You ran for no reason. Those police cars had been called to the bar near the hostel. The cops had to break up a drunken brawl.”

“Still, it is a good thing I left, or you might have found me there.”

“Are you married, Mia?”

“Are you?”

“I am, and he’s of Mexican descent.”

Mia smiled.

“That’s funny, I married a gringo. He was a tough biker who used to run drugs for the cartel, but ever since the baby came he stays home to take care of her.”

“My husband is the same way. He likes to feed our daughter her bottle.”

“You have a lot to live for. Put down that shotgun and I’ll do my best to let Graboro release you.”

“You lie well,” I said, “but I’m no fool.”

Mia gave a little shrug.

“It was worth a try, and it’s a shame, but you will die. Was your father killed the same way, sticking his nose in where it didn’t belong?”

“My father died in the line of duty, while working to catch a serial killer.”

“Do you miss him, Blue Steele?”

I nodded. “Every day of my life,”

“He must have been so pleased to know that you wanted to be a pig police officer like him, eh?”

“My father was a Texas Ranger, not a police officer.”

“What’s the difference?”

“My father specialized in the apprehension of fugitives.”

Mia shook her head.

“You really are following in his footsteps, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t always that way.”

~

LANDSVILLE, TEXAS, 2004

I WAS seventeen and dreading the conversation I was about to have with my daddy.

We had talked often over the years about my having a career in law enforcement. Daddy had always stressed that I should first get a college education.

I had agreed, despite how confining and restrictive I always felt school was. I seemed to learn more on my own and had a great curiosity about the world, along with a passion for reading.

The closer I got to the time when I had to make a decision on which school to attend, the more I knew that I didn’t want to go to college. I wanted to be out in the world earning a living and making a difference, not sitting in boring lecture halls for four years.

I found Daddy out in the small shack he used as a workshop, where he was mending the leg on one of the kitchen chairs. It was an old breakfast set. Either the chairs or the table itself always seemed to need mending.

When Daddy saw me enter, he smiled, but as he studied my face, the smile left his.

“Spit it out, girl. What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why do you have that look on your face?”

“What look?”

“It’s the same look you had when you were eight and cut off one of your sister’s pigtails.”

I laughed.

"Jenny had that coming. She had given my favorite doll a mustache with a black marker."

"I noticed she never messed with any of your things again," my father said with a wink.

There were several stools in the shop. I pulled one over and perched atop it.

"I didn't do anything bad, I promise."

"Okay, so what's on your mind?"

"College."

"Ah, so you know where you want to go?"

I said nothing, as I dreaded his reaction. My father had been tightening a vise as we spoke. He stopped what he was doing, pulled up another stool, then sat facing me.

"Blue? What's wrong, baby?"

I answered him while looking down at the floor. "I… I don't want to go to college."

Silence.

When I gathered my courage, I looked up into my father's face and saw that he had a thoughtful expression.

"If you don't go to college then you won't be eligible to become a Texas Ranger someday."

"I know," I said. "I don't want that anymore either."

Daddy rose up from the stool he was sitting on as his face reddened. He was mad at me, as I knew he would be. It had been assumed for some time that I would go to college, become a state trooper, then work toward becoming a Texas Ranger. I felt like I was letting him down, but I could no longer fool myself into believing my interests hadn't changed. I was wise enough, even at that young age, to know that you had to follow your heart. That was something my parents had taught my sister and me.

Daddy went back to work tightening the vise onto the chair leg, and did so with renewed vigor, which I knew was fueled by anger.

There was a loud, sharp noise, and a wide crack appeared in the leg, nearly splitting it in half. Daddy muttered a curse as he shook his head.

"Oh hell, it's past time I bought your mama a new kitchen set anyway."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Daddy stared at me.

"Don't be sorry. Tell me what you plan to do if you don't go to college. You do have a plan, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's hear it."

I had to swallow and take a deep breath before I began, but when I spoke there was no hesitation.

"Mama was talking to Aunt Gail on the phone last week and I got an idea from listening to their conversation."

"Jake's wife? That Aunt Gail?" Daddy asked, although I only had one Aunt Gail.

"Yes, sir."

A sad look came over him.

"Please don't tell me you're thinking of moving to New York City."

"No, no, but that's the thing, Daddy. Aunt Gail and Jake are coming here next year to open up a new branch of *Caliber Investigations*. When they do, I want to get a job there."

"Doing what?"

"I want to work as a private detective. I checked, and you don't need a college education to become one."

"That's not surprising. They probably spend their time tracking down cheating husbands. Is that what you want to do with your life?"

"Uncle Jake doesn't take cases like that and he's a private investigator. He even saved the president and became famous."

"Your Uncle Jake is a special man, Blue. He's risked his life many times to help out desperate clients."

"I know, and that's what I want too."

"You could make a difference as a Texas Ranger, and believe it or not, college ain't anything like high school. If you went, I'd bet the time would pass quicker than you'd think. After that, you could do many things, but by not going you limit yourself, baby."

"I understand that, but I still want to try to get with *Caliber Investigations*."

My father looked exasperated by my decision. He closed his eyes for a moment to, I assume, keep his temper in check, but when he opened them, he smiled at me.

"Do you know how young you are?"

"I'll be eighteen soon."

He laughed.

"Yeah, but you're still pretty young. You could spend the next five years walking down a wrong path and still have a ton of time to get on the right track. I know, I've been there."

"You didn't always want to be a ranger?"

"I did right up until the time the band I was in began getting paid to play. After that, I thought I was gonna be the next Hank Williams."

"What happened with the band?"

"Our drummer ran off with a girl from Memphis, then the bass player broke his leg in a rodeo. A few months after that and I was wearing a uniform."

"You think I'll be sorry and change my mind, don't you?"

"I don't know, baby. I do know that you have to follow your feelings. If I hadn't taken a chance with that band I always would have wondered how far I could have gotten in music. Now I know and have no regrets about it."

I thought over what Daddy said as he closed up his work shop. When he was done, I took his hand as we walked back to the house.

"Maybe I'll go to college someday."

"Maybe," Daddy said. "But I know whatever you do you'll be damn good at it. You've got the family grit, girl, and you're as smart as they come."

"Thank you, Daddy, and thanks for not being mad at me."

"I love you, Blue. Nothing you could ever do or say will change that."

"I love you too, Daddy."

That was the last day I ever saw my daddy. He went missing the following evening and it was over a decade before we learned that he'd been killed. And while I never became a Texas Ranger, I've done some good things with my life and wound up a federal agent. I like to think he'd be proud of me, and I strive to live up to the legacy he left behind.

~

"WHY ARE you staring at me like that?" Mia asked, breaking me from my reverie about my father.

"I wasn't staring," I said. "I was just thinking."

"Thinking of pulling that trigger, eh?"

"If one of us fires, the odds are good the other will too."

"Unless the first one is dead."

"And there's no guarantee that will happen," I said.

"If there was, Blue Steele, you'd be dead already."

A thumping sound reverberated from the ceiling and in reflex we both looked up, then locked eyes on each other again.

"It sounds like the fight has spilled into the villa," Mia said. "Juan's people are probably hunting down and killing the last of your fellow Feds."

I said nothing, as a second thump sounded, but Mia was right, the sound was ominous. If fighting was going on in the house, that could mean that Connors and his people were forced to move inside by Graboro's troops.

"They'll be coming for you soon, Blue Steele, and you'll never see your little girl again."

Although I hid my anger at the glee I heard in Mia's voice, I almost

pulled the trigger on my shotgun.

But not yet. I told myself. *Not yet.*

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“THE WAY I SEE IT, there’s no chance for you to get out of here alive,” Mia said.

“I’ll walk out of here when that door is forced opened by federal agents, then you’ll spend the rest of your life in a cell.”

Mia squinted at me. “How did you track me down?”

“Were you aware I was searching for you?”

“Not you personally, but I knew they’d send someone. I killed a DEA agent who I later learned had a political boss in his family. They couldn’t let that stand.”

“And you thought you’d be safe here in the villa until the heat died down?”

Mia laughed.

“I just arrived here this morning. It looks like I picked the wrong day to come here.”

“Maybe we both did,” I said.

“Juan said nothing about the raid until just before the shooting started. He was bragging that he had been tipped off by some bigshot in the DEA.”

“He’ll soon give up that name, and whoever the leak is will wish they never took his money.”

“You are so sure that your people will win the fight outside, from what I saw, your people were losing.”

“That was before they gained control of the gate, now it’s Graboro’s people who have to fight to get inside.”

“They still outnumber your people. They’ll kill them all, then you’ll be the last to die.”

“No, Mia, they’ll open that door and drag you out of here in handcuffs.”

“I would sooner die, like my papa.”

“How did your father die?”

“He made the mistake of showing mercy to someone and it came back to haunt him,” Mia said, and I saw the flash of a painful memory in her eyes.

~

MEXICO, 2006

EVERY HEAD in the bar turned to take in nineteen-year-old Mia Ortiz as she sauntered in wearing a slinky red dress. Being a Tuesday night, the bar wasn't crowded, but Mia would have stuck out in any group.

Among those present were three men. They were sitting at a table drinking beer and playing cards.

Mia smiled at them on her way to the bar, then watched as the biggest of the men walked over to join her.

"I'll buy whatever the lady is having, Luis," the man told the bartender.

"Thank you," Mia said, as she looked the man over. He was about thirty, tall, with a barrel of a chest and muscular arms. He was a handsome man and Mia thought that he must have bedded many young women over the years. But he had never met one such as her, for she was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

He introduced himself as Eduardo and Mia saw the interest in his eyes increase as she pretended to find him irresistible.

She joined Eduardo and his two friends at their table and detected the holsters on their hips that were covered by loose-fitting shirts.

Mia had four more drinks as the night wore on. Eduardo was attempting to get her drunk so as to make it easier to seduce her. He need not have bothered, Mia had every intention of going with him to his room in the motor court across the street.

The number of bar patrons had doubled by the time Mia stood up from the table and pretended to weave unsteadily. She was a regular drinker of tequila, and the weak wine she drank affected her not at all. Eduardo shared a laugh with his companions as they winked at him, sensing he was on the verge of another conquest.

Mia let Eduardo lead her from the bar with his arm around her waist as she continued to feign unsteadiness.

"I want to lie down," Mia said in a sleepy voice.

"We'll go to my room. It's right across the street."

"Good," Mia said.

~

ONCE THEY WERE inside his motel room, Eduardo took Mia in his arms and kissed her. Mia let him. After all, he was a handsome man and she might as well enjoy herself.

Before things got out of hand, she ended the embrace and twirled about.

"Put some music on, Eduardo. I like doing it to music."

"I have no radio."

"The TV then, they play music on some channels now."

Eduardo found a channel that played old rock music. Mia turned up the volume, then moved over to lie atop the bed. Her dress, which was short to begin with, rode up to reveal her shapely thighs along with the white lace panties she wore.

As Eduardo joined her on the bed, he grew tense, and appeared to be listening.

"Was that screaming?"

"All I heard was the music," Mia said, and as she spoke, she placed a hand on Eduardo's crotch.

That placed his full attention back on her and he hurried to shed his shirt, as he was in the process of doing that, Mia's hand slipped inside her purse.

~

THE SCREAMS EDUARDO had heard came from the bar he had just left. Mia's father, Fernando Ortiz had entered the bar with a silenced pistol at his side and used it to kill Eduardo's two friends, one of whom managed to free his gun, but the man died before he could fire it.

Fernando had been certain he could kill two armed men at once, but he thought that facing off against three was foolhardy. Mia, who often worked with her father as a distraction or a spy, lured Eduardo away to help her papa.

Chaos erupted in the bar after the shooting and two of the women present released screams. As the fleeing patrons rushed from the scene of fresh death, Fernando ran with them. He had to get across the street to the motel where he had seen Mia enter a room with the tallest of the three men.

His daughter had blossomed into a beautiful woman. Mia made quite the lure when needed, but he never placed her in a position of danger, although he had trained her to be able to take care of herself.

Fernando was rushing toward the room with the intention of raising a boot to kick in the door when Mia stepped outside.

"Let's go, Papa."

"But… the third man."

Mia opened her purse to show her father the small gun lying within, as she did so, Fernando could detect by smell that it had been recently fired.

"I handled him myself," Mia said.

She had gone six steps before realizing her father was still standing by the door.

"Come on, Papa. We have to go."

Fernando laughed. "You truly are a she-wolf, Mia."

“Of course, Papa. I am your daughter.”

~

FEELING IN A MOOD TO CELEBRATE, Fernando took Mia to dinner at one of her favorite restaurants along *La Calle Primera en Ensenada.* The place was an overpriced tourist trap, but Mia loved their food.

Fernando told his daughter that he was giving her half of his fee because she had done half of the work. He predicted that as they moved forward as a team they would become as feared and respected as anyone, and that they would reap huge rewards.

“There are young women your age slaving away in shops and factories for a pittance. That is because they don’t have your heart and intelligence. You will be rich someday, Mia, and you will never be anyone’s victim.”

“I owe what I am to you, Papa. You raised me to be strong and never treated me as weak because I was a girl.”

Fernando raised his glass in salute.

“I couldn’t be prouder of you if you were a son. I love you, Mia. You are my greatest joy.”

Mia grinned at her father, but the grin became a look of horror as Fernando’s chest erupted in spurts of blood. He had been shot twice in the chest by a young man who was advancing on their table while blasting away. Mia dived to the floor, then remembered that her gun was in her purse, which was hanging off her chair by its strap.

As the shooter grew nearer, Mia got a good look at him. He was young, perhaps twenty-five, and there was a heart-shaped birthmark on his neck below his left ear.

Fernando was slumped in his seat and wheezing blood when the man placed the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

“Noooo!” Mia screamed, as her father’s blood and brains showered her with gore.

The man took aim at her, his eyes full of hatred, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened, as his gun had jammed. The young man let out a shout of frustration, turned, and followed the panicked diners from the restaurant. Before he cleared the doorway, Mia had grabbed her purse from the chair and removed her gun.

She was only able to get off one quick shot. It missed her target, but it did blow apart a large window above the man’s head, causing shards of glass to rain down on him. As the assassin exited the restaurant, he did so while howling in pain. He had been cut well by the glass.

Mia crawled over to her father’s body and wept deep tears of

sorrow.

~

WHEN THE POLICE arrived at the restaurant, Mia wasn't there. She was out on the hunt for the man who had murdered her father.

She found him at the third hospital she visited. He was getting stitches for the cut the glass had opened up on his cheek.

Mia remained unseen and returned to her car, where she waited. When the man left the hospital, she followed him to a new home that sat among other new houses in a development in the hills. Mia parked in the driveway of a home with darkened windows and stared at the lair of her father's assassin.

Then, she waited, knowing that the hour before dawn was the best time to strike.

~

FERNANDO'S KILLER was named Ralphio Garcia. When Ralphio was twelve, Fernando killed his father on orders from Jose Graboro.

Ralphio's father had been attempting to muscle in on a business owned by Graboro, and after ignoring a warning, he was put down by Fernando as a lesson to others.

Ralphio had witnessed the killing through a window, but he had been spared by Fernando because of his young age. Ralphio's hatred had festered over the years, when it became all-consuming, he tracked down Fernando and killed him in revenge.

Mia learned all this after breaking into the home at 4:19 a.m.

Ralphio had confessed his motivation while Mia held a gun to his head. When he was finished, Mia pelted his skull with the weapon until he lay senseless and bleeding.

Afterward, she had moved about the home silently, while bringing death to all she crossed with the blade of a sharp knife. This included Ralphio's mother, his younger sister and brother, and his aged grandmother.

When Ralphio regained consciousness, through blurry eyes he beheld his dead family, whom Mia had dragged into his bedroom.

"You did this," she told Ralphio. "My father spared you and it cost him his life. I have shown no such mercy, and I never will."

Ralphio released an anguished cry and lunged at Mia. She shot him twice, then watched him die. Her father's prediction came true in the following years, as Mia became both feared and respected among members of the cartel. Like Blue Steele, Mia Ortiz followed in her father's footsteps.

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JUAN GRABORO MOANED LOUDLY AGAIN, and this time he sat up and opened his eyes. Graboro was in his fifties with thinning hair and a paunch, but he was feared by hundreds of younger men who did his bidding.

Graboro had his start as a soldier in the Mercoto cartel, which also spawned the late cartel leader Alonso Alvarado. Juan Graboro was every bit as ruthless as Alvarado, but more discriminating about when and where to use such force.

Known as a crafty survivor, Graboro had bolstered his reputation by being prepared for the raid on his compound with a counter-assault from the sea. I only prayed that his plan failed and that I would soon be released from the safe room by members of the task force.

As his mind cleared, Graboro became aware of Mia and me. Seeing that we were in a stand-off, he sought to tip things in Mia's favor.

The gun Mia had fired at me while I was chasing her through the house was in a holster on her left hip, with the grip facing outward. Graboro reached for it and I shouted a warning.

"Touch that gun and I'll kill you!"

"Then Mia will blast you with her shotgun," Graboro said.

I shifted the shotgun a little to my left in preparation of pulling the trigger. If I got lucky, my round would disable or kill both Graboro and Mia. However, being in such close quarters, the shotgun pellets wouldn't have the distance they needed to spread out. I would still fire rather than face-off against two guns.

"It's empty!" Mia shouted. "My gun is empty, Juan."

Graboro froze with his hand hovering above the gun. He eased himself back until he was sitting up straight again.

"Who is this bitch, Mia?"

"Her name is Blue Steele and she is a federal agent."

Graboro reached up a hand to touch the lump on his forehead.

"When my men open that door, Agent Steele, I will let them take turns with you."

I spoke to him while keeping my eyes on Mia.

"When the other agents arrive, I'll mention your threat. Perhaps they'll lock you in a cell with a man who will rape you."

Graboro made a sound of disgust.

“I wouldn’t see the inside of a cell in any case. I know too much about the people in power. They will see that I remain free.”

“No, you’ll be questioned about all those powerful people, and you’ll tell what you know, otherwise you’ll be released to take your chances.”

“What chances?”

“Think about it, Graboro. A huge task force raids your villa, loses many of its members, then arrests you. If you were to go free after all that your friends would be certain you cut a deal.”

I flicked my eyes up to take in his face and saw that Graboro was frowning.

“It does not matter,” he said. “My men will kill the other agents and release me from this room. Then you will die, but only after much suffering.”

Graboro stood and moved toward a white cabinet in a corner that was on Mia’s left.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“There is aspirin in this cabinet, along with bottled water. My head is throbbing. I need something for the pain.”

After opening the cabinet slowly to show me that it contained what he said it did, Graboro spun a top off a bottle of water. He drank some along with pills he’d released from a foil packet.

“Are you thirsty, Mia?”

“I’m good, Juan,” Mia said.

I was thirsty, but apparently my discomfort was of no concern to Graboro, as he didn’t offer me water.

After drinking from the bottle, Graboro moved his hand up as if he were about to sit the water on a shelf inside the cabinet. Instead, he reached past the cabinet and shut off the recessed lights in the ceiling, plunging the room into blackness.

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“SHOOT HER, MIA! KILL HER!” Graboro shouted after dousing the lights.

When the room went dark I fell to my right and stretched out atop the floor. Bits of the wall above me rained down as an ear-splitting roar filled the room. I rolled toward Mia and Graboro, knowing that I must have been illuminated in the flash of light caused by the shotgun’s discharge.

The same brief light gave me Mia’s position as well, she had also dived to her right, but I didn’t dare fire with the one shell I had left unless I could be certain of hitting what I aimed at.

The only illumination in the room came from the tiny green bulb embedded in an overhead smoke detector. It was next to useless at lighting the room.

I remembered the night-vision monocular Connors had given me before I leapt over the wall, then realized I no longer had it. I had dropped it when the dogs attacked, then forgotten it after seeing that Connors had been wounded.

Despite the advantage the device would have given me inside the dark room, it might have been for the best that I’d left it behind. I was unfamiliar with the monocular. If it made any sound while being activated, Mia would have zeroed in on it and blasted away.

Someone stepped on my right elbow and I assumed it was Graboro, since Mia had been on the other side of me. I winced from the pain his foot caused me, but I refrained from reacting with a moan. Using the shotgun’s barrel, I hit Graboro somewhere on his body. It must have been a tender spot because he let out a yelp.

A second blast from the shotgun lit up the small room once more, and a ricocheting pellet stung me on the calf. It also did some unintended damage. Graboro let out a scream, then groaned loudly. I scrambled to my feet and moved again before Mia could take another shot. When I realized the wall was behind me, I felt around and found the switch.

The room erupted with light that made me squint. When I located Mia, I saw that she was looking away. She had changed position, but was still seated across from me, with the door to her immediate left. As I centered my shotgun on her, she did the same, and we were once

again in a stand-off.

The instigator of the one-sided firefight, Juan Graboro, had come out on the losing end of things. Mia's second shot had done great damage to him. He lay in an opposite corner, clutching his left side, while gritting his teeth.

Mia let out a string of curses as her dark eyes bored into me.

"Why did you not fire your weapon?"

"I didn't want to get hit by ricocheting pellets."

A devious little grin formed on Mia's mouth.

"Your weapon is empty, isn't it?"

"No."

"You lie. It is empty, and you have been bluffing."

"If you're so sure of that, put your shotgun down. If my gun is empty, then you'll have nothing to worry about."

Mia barked out a laugh.

"You would be fun to play poker with, Blue Steele, and I still believe your gun is empty."

"It's not empty."

"Perhaps."

"Help me, Mia," Graboro said in a weak voice. A glance toward him revealed that he was lying on his back in his own blood.

"I can do nothing, Juan, not until our people open the door."

"Doctor… I need a doctor."

"Soon, Juan."

"Open… the… door."

"I can't, Juan. If I turned my back on this federal witch, she would shoot me."

"Empty," Graboro said, in a voice that was nearly a sigh.

"Her shotgun might be empty, but I can't be sure."

Graboro was silent as the blood surrounding him spread into a wider pool of red.

Mia and I stared across at each other wordlessly, as the minutes ticked by with the weight of hours.

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THERE WAS no clock inside the safe room, so I had no way to know how long we'd been locked inside.

Instead, I measured the time by the weight of the shotgun. Its actual weight was about five pounds, but it had come to seem as heavy as an anvil.

My grip on it had grown slick, while the finger inside the trigger housing was completely numb. Then there were the shooting pains in my arms that came and went. I would have loved to set the thing down for even a moment, but I didn't dare.

Sitting on the concrete floor was doing me no favors either, while my back ached at the base of my spine. My ankle, which I had hurt while landing after my leap over the wall, was still sore but appeared normal and free of swelling.

There was also the cut above my left eye. The cut had sealed itself. However, the dried blood on the side of my face itched. I could not scratch it. If I removed a hand from the rifle I wouldn't be able to brace the stock if I needed to fire it.

Mia, who had seemed so cool and collected earlier, seemed to be suffering as well. She grimaced often as various pains in her hands, wrists, and arms vexed her. I could sympathize with her plight. We were in the same boat.

As for Juan Graboro, he was hanging in there. The ex-street soldier let out the occasional moan that let us know he was alive.

I really didn't care if he lived or not, but Connors said Graboro was a wealth of information. It would be a shame to lose that potential knowledge after so many lost their lives in the cause to take the man into custody.

Noises came from above again. This time in the form of loud voices. Although we could hear them, we couldn't make out their words.

After a period of quiet, sound came from outside the door. Someone was finally coming to investigate the safe room.

I stared across at Mia and saw her looking back at me with an unreadable expression. Beeps emanated from the door, indicating that a code was being fed into the keypad.

Mia sat to the left of the door, while I was across from it. Whoever

entered would see her first.

Both of us held our breath as the magnetic door locks released, and as the door began to open, Mia made a disastrous error. Curiosity got the better of her and she turned her head to look at the man entering the safe room.

The instant she took her eyes from me I fired.

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"¡*Alto el fuego*!"

The shouted command telling me to cease-fire was in Spanish, but it was spoken with an American accent. Better yet, it was a voice I had come to know over the last couple of days.

"Agent Richards, it's Blue Steele. The woman lying in the doorway is Mia Ortiz."

A cautious eye appeared near the halfway mark of the door and I released the shotgun and raised my hands.

"The room is secure, Agent Richards, and there are two hostiles down."

Richards entered the safe room with three other agents as I moved over to check on Mia. As I walked the few steps, I limped, as the circulation in my legs returned. There was also pain from the shotgun pellet that struck my calf.

My shotgun blast had hit Mia where her hands had been holding her weapon. The impact of the steel pellets sent her shotgun flying while splintering its wooden stock. She had taken damage to the left forearm and hand, but worst of all, her abdomen.

She lay on the floor in a state of agony, much as Graboro had done earlier. She was in far too much pain to speak, but as her eyes saw me standing over her, the hate in them was easy to understand.

I had intended to fire at her no matter who came through the door. Unlike Mia, I had everything to lose.

If the Feds opened the door, Mia was good. She would be arrested, but not raped and slaughtered. If the cartel opened the door, she would be free to go and leave me to my fate. As for me, I had to strike first. Mia was going away for life. killing me wouldn't have added a day to her sentence, and once she'd seen Richards at the door, I believe her next act would have been to pull the trigger. I just beat her to it.

"Graboro's alive, but just barely," said a Mexican agent.

"Good," Richards said. "That bastard needs to keep living long enough to rat out his friends."

The same Mexican agent checked on Mia.

"Will she live?" I asked.

"I think so, but we need to get them both airlifted out of here as

soon as possible."

Richards studied the dried blood on my face.

"You need medical attention."

"It's a scratch, it can wait," I said.

"What went on here, Steele?" Richards asked.

As I was filling him in, Mia and Graboro were stabilized and placed on stretchers. Once that was done, they were carted out of the safe room. I caught sight of Mia as they were carrying her up the stairs. Her eyes were looking back at me, and although her arms were strapped down, she still managed to give me the finger. I knew then that she was going to live.

~

A BATTLE HAD RAGED inside the villa, where Richards let me know that they had been involved in a stand-off of their own as each side battled to get the upper hand. The battle was decided after backup arrived in the form of twenty additional Mexican agents. The thumping Mia and I had heard above our heads earlier was the sound of a flash-bang grenade going off.

Richards and I stepped around bodies to get to the front of the house. The doors in the entryway were each hanging by a hinge and were marked by bullet holes.

When a paramedic saw me, she insisted on cleaning my face of the blood and bandaging the wound. She did so while Richards and I sat in chairs in the foyer.

"You know you saved our asses, don't you, Steele?" Richards said. "If you and Connors hadn't gone over the wall and opened those gates we'd all be toast."

"It was self-preservation," I said.

"Yeah, but I still owe you one."

When the paramedic had finished with me I felt much better and told her so. She sent me a smile and moved on to treat others.

Once outside, I saw yet more bodies, including the ones near the gate that I'd had a hand in killing. I didn't like to kill and avoided it when I could, but when it was kill or be killed, I never hesitated.

I had a question to ask Richards that I dreaded the answer to, but after looking around and not spotting him, I needed to ask.

"Where's Agent Connors?"

Richards was about to answer when a gunshot came from down on the beach. It was followed by a second shot, then, there was silence. Richards was on the radio in an instant seeking answers.

Several seconds passed before a voice came over the speaker on his walkie-talkie.

“A stray cartel soldier took a shot at Javier and missed. Javier nailed him in the arm and he dropped his weapon. We’re over by the stables.”

“I’ll be right there,” Richards said.

As he began running toward the stables I hollered to him.

“What about Agent Connors?”

Richards pointed to my left as he ran.

“He’s in one of the ambulances.”

“Oh no.” I thought. Connors had been wounded when I’d last seen him, but at least he was still alive. Many agents had fared worse. Some of them were lying under sheets atop of stretchers.

There was a long line of ambulances, and in some of them, an agent was being treated for an injury or a minor wound. I found Connors in the very last ambulance. His right leg was bandaged at the thigh. It was an injury he’d received while risking his life to come to my aid. I owed him much for that. Despite the pain he must have been in, he was smiling.

Agent Connors was sitting on the floor of the ambulance between two stretchers, and atop each stretcher was one of the Rottweilers he’d been forced to shoot. The hounds were heavily bandaged, and drugged, but they weren’t so out of it that they didn’t eat the doggie treats Connors was feeding them.

He looked up at me with a huge grin.

“The doctor said they’ll both recover.”

I laughed, sat beside him, and petted the dogs.

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AFTER ENTERING the bail bonds company on Lancaster Avenue in Fort Worth I was met with a shout of greeting by my old boss and good friend, Ron Tenney. Ron owned the business and was there with two other friends of mine who were bounty hunters, Randy and George.

When the three men spotted Ruby in my arms their smiles became looks of delight. Ruby surprised me by smiling back at them. I had thought she might be a little frightened at meeting, what were to her, three strangers, but no, she smiled and cooed at them.

Ron held Ruby in his arms and spoke to her in baby talk, then looked at me.

"She'll be as beautiful as her mama, and I love that you named her after Ruby."

"I owe Ruby a lot," I said. "Naming my daughter after her just felt right."

Randy and George had to leave, but we made a date to meet for lunch soon to catch up. As Ron handed Ruby back to me, he asked a question.

"Are you happy, Blue?"

"Ron, life gets better every day."

He smiled at me the way a father would.

"It's no better than you deserve."

~

RAMÓN HAD FUSSED over my minor injuries when I returned home, and I let him. I love being spoiled.

Ruby had missed me as much as I missed her, and at first, she cried whenever I left her sight. It made me wonder about Mia's daughter and how she was faring without her mother, but I couldn't dwell on that.

Despite her upbringing, Mia was a grown woman who had sown the seeds of her own fate. I was told that she would recover, but she would never be free again.

After surviving his wounds, Juan Graboro stonewalled the American and Mexican authorities for three days before breaking down and making a deal.

The Mexican authorities had tracked down his wife and arrested her as an accomplice. Mia had claimed that Graboro loved his wife dearly. It seemed she hadn't lied.

Graboro cut a deal for his wife's freedom in exchange for information about other cartels and their leaders. The agreement would have him serving time in the United States. Graboro would never see the light of day again. However, he would live out his life under an assumed name inside a country club prison, one where his wife could visit him often.

Mia might have cut a deal of her own, but she refused to talk to anyone other than her lawyer. From the time we spent together, my guess was that she was hoping to escape someday. If so, I would go after her. It's what I do. I hunt down fugitives and bring them to justice, just like my daddy.

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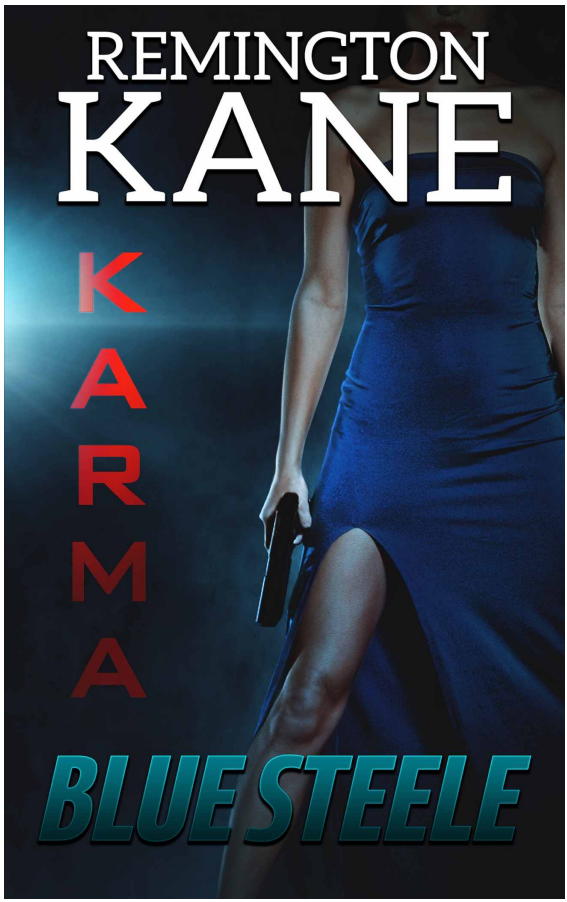

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